

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of an interview with Angel Vera by Cynthia Tobar on November 10, 2015 in New York City. This interview is part of "Cities for People, Not for Profit": Gentrification and Housing Activism in Bushwick. This is a translation of a Spanish language interview. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Angel Vera

Cynthia Tobar: Good afternoon, thank you for participating in this project. Today is Tuesday, November 10, 2015. Can you please introduce yourself and your role in the organization?

Angel Vera: My name is Angel Vera and I'm the organizer with the Committee on Housing and Environment Justice of Make The Road New York.

Cynthia Tobar: Great to meet you and thank you for taking part in this project. I would like to ask you, how long have you worked – lived or worked in Bushwick?

Angel Vera: I've been living here for over two decades. Since '92 and I've been working in Bushwick with Make The Road New York since 2005.

Cynthia Tobar: Can you tell me your story, how you got involved with Make The Road New York and the fight for fair housing?

Angel Vera: Before I came to New York I was involved with a farmworker's organization, a part of the socialist movement for five years and those ideas of social justice, community and equality - of community, since then I've carried with me. When I got to New York I was looking for community organizations, spaces to interact with people with similar interests and I was able to work with some community organizations until 1999 when Camino Al Andar forms, moving their office close to where I lived in Bushwick, it was nearby so I started to get involved that year with what was then Se Hace Camino Al Andar and now Se Hace Camino Nueva York (Make the Road New York).

Cynthia Tobar: Tell me about your experience. How long have you been in the neighborhood, in Bushwick before getting involved with fair housing there?

Angel Vera: Like I said, I moved to Bushwick from Ecuador at the end of '92 and began my work as an organizer dealing with housing in 2005 so it's over a decade

Cynthia Tobar: Yeah

Angel Vera: that I've been living in the neighborhood and so I know what it is to be in Bushwick especially in matters of housing.

Cynthia Tobar: Can you share those experiences – how was it, what was the neighborhood like, your personal experience if you care to share. What was that experience like?

Angel Vera: Well, at that time in the nineties the rent was affordable. You had a lot of factory work in the area – sweaters, sweater factories, they always had their signs up: "machine operators wanted" there was a lot of factories by Wyckoff, and in Manhattan. So Bushwick was affordable in those

times the rent was \$400, \$500, \$600, and Bushwick – the neighborhood happened to have a lot of rent that was regulated, or stabilized, but times have changed.

Cynthia Tobar: When did you start noticing those changes?

Angel Vera: Those changes have been happening across the board, probably since 2000 when – when people from a different economic background began to move into Bushwick so it slowly – you started to feel the price of real estate, be it for rentals or to purchase a house, the values were going up. But you can start to see this more aggressively – after the housing bubble – onward it became harder to live in the Bushwick area.

Cynthia Tobar: Can you describe to me what the community reactions were to these changes and describe the actions – given your experience as an organizer in Ecuador, how that has prepared you for the struggle for fair housing here in the community.

Angel Vera: Well, in the 2000s something that was really felt not only in Bushwick but in Brooklyn, the Bronx, was the issue of living conditions, the repairs, the bad conditions, the rat infestation, lead, the asthma rate – very high in Bushwick. So the community started organizing around these issues, all of the things that had to do with the living conditions the repairs and the negligence of the owners. After, you started to notice the harassment, harassment by the owners in order to get the tenants to leave their apartments so they could rent at a higher price, and overall to people from a different economic background or to gentrifiers as we call them. So that's how you start to feel the gentrification that accelerated this tenant harassment and displacement brought on by the change of real estate.

Cynthia Tobar: And how – what is your take on how this has affected the Latino community in the neighborhood?

Angel Vera: can we pause?

Angel Vera: [When] dealing with social issues, recycling, ecological issues that are important – but due to the cultural barriers, the language barriers – in terms of non-profits that don't necessarily line up with - it's hard to fit if that makes sense. Especially in housing, because lately even though there are laws that are against discrimination in housing, economic background, race or family, sexual orientation etc. there's still a lot of discrimination and the – sorry – can you I lost my thought

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you

Angel Vera: Even though there are laws against harassment, discrimination in housing, it's still there, harassment

Cynthia Tobar: yes

Angel Vera: so from there our work, our mission, being educated on our rights, the law and knowing how to use it to defend ourselves right. So, as I said before our doors are open to all who participate and come here and support the cause. With the new groups or new people that come into the neighborhood that have passed out flyers, or done presentations, we've looked for participation, an informal collaboration

Angel Vera: Due to those language barriers, the differences between –

Cynthia Tobar: culture

Angel Vera: culture – the needs, the aspirations that each group has doesn't make that integration easy, this collective effort – we've had many occasions where new people in the community take part in meetings, in efforts, going up to Albany with us. Some have done it for a really long time, generally it's younger people that are here on a temporary basis and then go, but the Latino community - the bulk of our members - are more stable, they have families and tend to be in it for the long haul. Now, something that makes a big difference in the last couple of years with displacement or gentrification in Bushwick is the fact that there's new investors in real estate, the market is constantly changing, rising – the cost of housing has gone up too much, that wave – gentrification right, the demand for apartments, they're willing to pay a higher rent so there're owners, new owners, even though it's legal, they've said explicitly 'we don't want Latinos, we don't want families, with children. We prefer younger people, white, with dogs'. So, that response from those in real estate is – it's obvious then, that makes the integration harder. It's easier for a young man that's a young professional, an artist, to get an apartment. He's on his own, doesn't have a family, the owners are more willing to rent him an apartment. In a couple of years they know he'll be gone as opposed to renting to a family that'll be there longer. The owners of rent stabilized apartments, especially – if you have a renter that is permanent, living there a long time, there aren't any opportunities, legal or otherwise, to increase rent. So families that are living for 20/30 years in a rent stabilized apartment their rent is around a thousand or under two thousand dollars, whereas a family that has moved around a lot, their rent could be 2,500 or deregulated. That can happen in the same building. Each apartment has its own scale. So it's better for owners to have people that aren't going to live in an apartment for a long period of time. So this makes – how – it makes this – it makes this integration impossible in the collective housing work. And of course the new person that is coming in isn't the one responsible for the displacement but it's a factor that's present. But we have members, new people, members, young people that receive free legal services, some that work with our committees not just on housing, but labor or education, and our other committee. It's interesting sharing their experience, their leadership, their ability to communicate in a common language. But I can't say that there's that gelling – that fit. But like I said, the doors are always open and want to work together, and offer mutual support.

Cynthia Tobar: You talked about working in social justice in Ecuador, can you tell me about the differences in terms of the style of activism in Ecuador and what you've experienced here in the United States, in New York, as an activist? What are some of the victories, the challenges of both styles – if there are any differences?

Angel Vera: There are huge differences, considering that overall I was very active during the 80s and the beginning of the 90s. So, I worked with the Union De Comunidades Campesinas de Gualaceo for five years – a city a – but before that I was in seminary so after that there was a transition. So I had a lot of support from that organization, from the local church. At the time there was a strong movement inspired by a liberation ideology for sought social justice -that vision, that conceptualization of a communal God as opposed to a hierarchical God, a God that was part of the community, in your neighbor in your friend. Our people, Latin America, is very religious and particularly this organization the pastoral and the organizing were two pillars right that structured our work. There our work, the work was different. We had committees, in this organization we had

14 committees – like 80 different farmworkers’ associations that had their ministerial assembly and then their organizational meeting after. It was interesting that support. There were leaders on the ministry side that were also leaders in the organizing side too. We had committees for example, there was a committee on commercialization. So if we wanted to avoid the middle man – that would end up raising prices we would look for a direct way to sell, straight from the coast to the sierra, so there was a communal store where the prices would be a bit lower than in the market. So that’s something that would be impossible to do here. There’s a fight for water, for community orchards, we had a committee on health, medicine, alternative and natural medicine, here it’s impossible. There’s no land to work with. Here the work is more institutional - the target is an institution, public or private, where we demand rights, better politics, better salaries. There, if it’s in housing perhaps we’re asking for the construction of housing for the community. Here it’s asking for fair rent, for the conditions because the rent system, housing, here is different. There the farmworkers had their house. But the focus is the same, justice, equality, respect and equality.

Cynthia Tobar: How does it allow activists to plan how their efforts are going to have a greater impact(?) With your time here, the years you’ve spent as an organizer with Make the Road, can you give me your impression of your time here, what do you expect at the end of the day? What is your impression after being involved and staying involved with the organization? How has it been? What do you hope for in your continued work? Hopes? Desires?

Angel Vera: Well, there’s plenty.

Cynthia Tobar: right

Angel Vera: In the decade that I’ve been here like the majority of immigrants, being undocumented, not knowing the language, I’ve been through many adventures: work discrimination, language barriers, identity crises, dealing with questionable agencies – the usual immigrant experience in this country. From the time that I had the opportunity in 2005 to work with – well, before 2005 – before starting that work as an organizer with Make the Road when it was close to where I lived, I began my first organizing work in New York with the project for civic engagement of New York a union and community organization from 2003 or 2002 to 2005. So it was a new and interesting experience. It’s been my purpose, my mission, my vision to work for a collaborative space, for those in need, that are limited by their immigration status, undocumented, don’t speak the language, or can’t navigate this cold, cement, and often desolate city for most that are alone, families apart, unemployed, displaced – it’s my goal to create this space so that anyone that comes through the door to the organization comes out with hope, with a smile, with something in hand, we won’t always have an answer or a solution, which is what we’ll work to find together, but perhaps an alternative, contacts, another organization that could help them move from the suffering. The key thing, the most important thing is to feel like we’re not alone, that there’s power in coming together, that we can develop our leadership, the empowerment of knowing your rights. Also, to know that we’re agents of change, affirming the presence of the immigrant, of the worker of the tenant in the City of New York. We have a motto, “we’re here to stay, to live with dignity and respect.

Cynthia Tobar: That’s wonderful. At the end of the day, what is the impact that this kind of work has had on you personally, working as an organizer, what are your thoughts?

Angel Vera: Well, - it’s – I feel that the work that I’ve been doing goes in hand with my values, that desire to create something new, that desire to further the hope in a new society, the exchanges

between people where money isn't the priority, but the people. I'm very satisfied having shared with people, members of the community, having helped bring a smile to people, facilitate leadership and education, bring about a consciousness and critical thought, a love for the fruits of justice and having the beautiful opportunity to share that – that passion and to bring that to other spaces, allowing people to develop their abilities, their values, in service for the community. For example Lolita who's here, she's a natural leader, and she's like family. She's always here and whenever she has time randomly, she's responsible for the calls throughout the week, prepare the activities, she coordinates and invites people, in meetings, in our actions she's a strong leader. They're lovely experiences and a lot of jobs are alienating – you don't want to go in, you want your eight hours to be over so I can go – here I feel different. I care about it, it's like my own business, and I enjoy it.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you so much. I think we're done. Do you have any words before we finish the interview?

Angel Vera: For the community in general, for tenants in Bushwick – well we're in Queens right now – but

Cynthia Tobar: yes.

Angel Vera: It's like – Invite, to continue that search, to keep an open mind, to keep learning about your rights, to look for answers. I like seeing people that go from one place to another figuring things out, they read the paper, now with the ease of technology to keep searching. With that curiosity to find a way. When it comes to building community – when they want to contribute what they know what they have – I invite them to pursue that, to participate, to look, to build community and also, to think that the social structures can change. Even though they may seem closed off after years, decades, centuries – no. We can make the difference if we decide to, if we build unity with others, the thousands that are in search of the same - with the same motivations.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

Angel Vera: Thank you Cynthia.