

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of a group interview with Gladys Puglia by Cynthia Tobar on November 16, 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.

Gladys Puglia

Cynthia Tobar: Hello, good evening, it is Monday, November 16th, 2015. I'm at Gladys's house. Gladys can you introduce yourself and talk about your role in Make the Road?

Gladys Puglia: Good afternoon, my name is Gladys Puglia, I am a volunteer in Make the Road NY, I've participated almost 6 years going on 7 years working with the executive board, working with that committee.

Cynthia Tobar: Could we start with how you came to be a resident here in Bushwick?

Gladys Puglia: I lived in Williamsburg, I lived there for about 10 years. I moved for two reasons, well three. One was the smog, since I lived on the 6th floor, it was harmful to my daughter because of her asthma. Secondly, too, at that time I was accepted into the Section 8 program, so I had to find a bigger apartment, because that was only a one-bedroom and I had three kids. We lived comfortably though because my kids had the entire living room to themselves – two boys and a girl. I had to find them their own rooms. I started looking all over Brooklyn. Because Manhattan was expensive and I found this area, I liked the area it was nice. This area where I live now, I'm 18 going on 19 years living here, there were a lot of children. That's what I liked about the neighborhood at that time. So I moved because of situation of looking for more space for my kids. I found it more comfortable, and like I said it was a Latino neighborhood, there were children, plus the park, even though it wasn't cleaned up at the time – we all fought to get it fixed – so I moved from there. I noticed some changes too. Rents were going up all around, it was changing a lot; Williamsburg was changing a lot. But mostly it was for my daughter because she suffered from asthma and especially on that street on Roebling, the trucks would drive by on their way into Williamsburg, it would affect here even more so. I had to get away from that from that traffic. But from there I got to this area. I thought it would be better and I raised my kids. Yes, it was better, but I had a lot of issues with the owner at that time, because now it's a different owner. The owner wanted to kick me out, since the area was changing he wanted to get me out so he could rent out at a higher rate and I didn't have Section 8 anymore. So I said okay let's go to court and I spent ten years in court with him until he finally gave up and sold the buildings.

Cynthia Tobar: And this was in Williamsburg?

Gladys Puglia:

No, here, here. Williamsburg was fine, maybe I shouldn't have moved. I think I would've fared better.

Cynthia Tobar: And how long had you been in Williamsburg?

Gladys Puglia: Like ten years.

Cynthia Tobar: Ten years! And then you move here and spend ten years in court! Describe what that was like.

Gladys Puglia:

Well, you see, the owner didn't want to do repairs. Not until this new owner that came in to fix a couple of some overdue repairs. He also didn't want any more Section 8 folks. But I told him I didn't have it anymore! More than anything it was about what he didn't want to fix. He wanted to get rid of us so he could do all of the repairs and rent it for more. You understand. So that's why I asked my neighbor for help, her name is Luisa Mejia, she told me, 'Gladys there's this organization that can help you with these problems.' That's why she took me to Make the Road.

Cynthia Tobar:

Can you describe for me what your first impression was when you got there?

Gladys Puglia: Like I said – the way I tell this story to the new members and newcomers as to how I got there I tell them look, just like you walked in the door looking for help, trying to avoid getting kicked out of your apartment, fighting for your apartment – when I came I came in to people listening to someone speak at the front of the room and another man directing – that day that I came in I was listening to them talk about tenant's rights. So I said, well, let's give this a shot. It won't hurt to try. It's not during work hours, it's at night, I can stay and listen til the end. They said it'd be about two and a half hours, I thought it was fine, I had work in the morning, but I decided to check it out. And I learned a lot that night because they were talking about the problems that I was having, because the owner was saying this, demanding that, and not making any repairs. They were talking about that. So the men that were leading the meeting were Angel and Jesse at that time, Jesse isn't there anymore. They said you should stand if you had a problem so everyone else could hear it. I said sure, I talked about it and they said they could help. And like I tell everyone else, ever since I walked through that door they haven't let me walk out! Because I've really enjoyed it, giving my free time – because I don't have babies anymore my children are young adults now so I don't have to be at home taking care of them. So that's what I give anytime that I'm there, my free time. And what I like is that everyone that comes looking for help we try to help, we teach them about their rights, so they can keep defending themselves and that's helped me all these years, that's why I'm still here, because if the organization weren't there I'd be on the streets or somewhere else, homeless, or living in some room, it's because of them and their help that I'm still here.

Cynthia Tobar:

How did you fight and win that struggle to hold onto this apartment?

Gladys Puglia: Don't think the fight is over!

Cynthia Tobar: No

Gladys Puglia: I'm fighting with this new owner now too. Again in court because now that he's seen the change in the area, the gentrification, he's been kicking out all the Latinos bit by bit – he has three buildings, yes three buildings next to each other are his. They used to belong to the previous owner. And he's been either buying them or paying their move wherever they want and giving them some money so they leave. People have sold themselves.

Cynthia Tobar: And you haven't taken those offers?

Gladys Puglia: No, he has made them though. He's made me an offer and I refused. If I leave your apartment it's going to be for one that you'll be buying or one that I will, but until then I'm going to keep living here.

Cynthia Tobar: You're volunteering your free time, how do you do that with work, how do you find the time to participate in the organization between work and your obligations?

Gladys Puglia: It's hard but thank goodness I have a 7 hour work day that sometimes when there's marches or day conferences I'll ask for a couple of hours, if it's nearby so that I can go. And thank goodness that as you work you accumulate time so it covers those couple of hours. But from there, after 4PM I'm free. The organization meetings start at 7 so I enough time so that I don't have to miss work.

Cynthia Tobar: And what do you do?

Gladys Puglia: I do clerical work.

Cynthia Tobar: Here in the neighborhood?

Gladys Puglia: No in Manhattan.

Cynthia Tobar: That's great –

Gladys Puglia: I have the same amount of time living here that I've worked there. Thank God – but you know if I take a break from the organization I'm taking one from work too.

Cynthia Tobar: And this participation in the organization comes from your family, your upbringing, your beliefs, from before coming to Bushwick, participating in these kinds of activities, or are you the first?

Gladys Puglia: I'm the first, but I did get involved a little in my country when a preside was running for office was killed I got involved at school, but after that – after I saw how politics were I didn't like and I got out completely after I found out that they'd killed him I said no more! And from there – I came to this country really young, 15 or 16 –

Cynthia Tobar: From where?

Gladys Puglia: Ecuador. Once I was here I didn't participate. I got involved more so after going through the issues with housing, after dealing with the impoverished communities, with the Latino community, poor communities that are struggling because they don't know their rights, because they're scared, because they're immigrants, they're scared because they're undocumented so they don't put up a fight and they let themselves be kicked out. Seeing all that injustice throughout the years I said, no, I have to do something. Like I said, ever since I walked through the door I just never walked out. I've been involved all these years and I've liked it. Like I've said, it's great to teach them and see them pass on that knowledge to those that can't make it in. That's what we try to teach them, learn and teach, that's what we want, the strength in the community coming together and learning. That's the mission of the organization. For them to inform themselves, to teach, and come together.

Cynthia Tobar: What campaigns or activities have you participated in since you've started?

Gladys Puglia: Oof a lot!

Cynthia Tobar: Your successes?

Gladys Puglia:

Well, we've won more in the translation of the six languages in the City, the 24 hour asthma related repairs, so if you call 311 and have mold or something like that they have to come in and fix it.

Cynthia Tobar: In your apartment?

Gladys Puglia: In your apartment, all over the City. Also the building owners – they're using corporations – shell companies. I've realized what that situation is like because this owner does that, he uses a corporation as opposed to him being listed as the owner. The ghost mailboxes, 'm going through that too, there's no office, it's just a mailbox, so if you're paying rent it's just a mailbox.

Cynthia Tobar: How does that affect tenants?

Gladys Puglia: The problem is that they list a round the clock phone number, it's a machine and they'll get back to you about what's going on with your apartment. It wasn't like that before. You don't have an office to go to or to meet someone, to say here's the rent, not even the owner, or to get a receipt. You can't get a receipt from a mailbox. You don't have somewhere to address your concerns because it's a machine. And when you have an emergency they don't come. They don't come.

Cynthia Tobar: And what are some strategies the organization has taught you to combat those issues?

Gladys Puglia: Well, first, if you call them and they don't come in 24 hours depending on the situation you call 311 and state your complaint. If 311 doesn't get back to you within two days you call 311 again and they'll fine the owner for not making the repairs and they send an HPD

investigator to see what's going on and why they're not making repairs. So that's a strategy that we use now, if you have an issue call 311. And it's not just calling once, you have to call again and again, until an inspector comes by.

Cynthia Tobar: Have you seen that strategy play out in this building.

Gladys Puglia: Yeah, see, I didn't always have this light, I had another one but it was coming down because the previous owner came to fix something with the electricity and left the wires hanging, he came to fix it after and the one in the kitchen as well. Now I have the sink in the kitchen that's falling apart and they don't come – last year he said he was going to come by supposedly, hasn't come and I have mold in the bathroom, he knocked down one of the walls to get the mold out, but now it's back. It hasn't been a year from what he did and I've told him that if he doesn't change all three walls it's going to come back. If you don't put down a treatment by the bottom of the tub it's going to come back. All he did was change that one wall and now it's full of mold and he hasn't come by to fix it. Any paint you see is what I've painted. Not even the previous owner painted, and you're supposed to do it every three years but no – I painted that wall 8 years ago.

Cynthia Tobar: How much is your rent if I may?

Gladys Puglia: Yeah it's almost 1300.

Cynthia Tobar: You live with your children?

Gladys Puglia: Yes with my children and an elderly woman that was kicked out of a room where she used to live and she was on the street looking for an apartment and I told her that day, "look I have a son that is in and out all the time, I have an empty room if you'd like you can stay there and she helps a me a little bit with the rent and my kid has a job so let's see if we can keep it going like that because even the jobs are tough.

Cynthia Tobar:

Your neighbor, that referred you to the organization what happened with her?

Gladys Puglia: She's still upstairs. It's just us left from all the people that lived here.

Cynthia Tobar: And who lives here now?

Gladys Puglia: It's white people, Americans, young people, students – listen, gentrification is good, all I want is for them to understand - them moving into a building where a lot of Latinos, a lot of elderly people used to live and have been moved out of their apartments to make room for them, supposedly renovated apartments, to understand who lived there before them. Or if they're here seasonally they should try to leave the apartment to someone else so that they don't raise the rent, because that's what the owners take advantage of every time someone leaves they try to take the apartment out of rent control. And like our committee organizer says, we're losing 1000 rent controlled/rent stabilized apartments a year, why? Because people come stay short-term and leave so when they leave the owner comes and does a quick-fix and raises the rent again. So

that's what they're getting rid of the low-income housing for low-income families. Pretty soon there won't be any affordable housing anywhere.

Cynthia Tobar: How much are they renting these apartments for?

Gladys Puglia: 1800, 2000, 2500. That's what it's gone up to. And what we did once – with the other owner – he wanted to put in water heaters the – the water heaters so that each apartment could pay for its own hot water. So there were four Latino families living there –

Gladys Puglia:

So I went to the organization – because the owner came – I went to the organization and told them, listen they're trying to install a water heater and that's not in my contract and that he'd showed me documents stating that it was for renovations for who knows what and then he dropped off the papers for the water heaters under those documents but on the ones on top it didn't mention anything about them. He thought I couldn't read! So I told him – and I showed the attorney, “can you please look at this,” because I – I don't see anywhere – he wants to put in water heaters in all the apartments

Cynthia Tobar: Let's pick up where we left off, you were telling me about the water heaters that they wanted to put in.

Gladys Puglia: So they wanted to put them in – he came with those notices and I told him no – he wanted me to sign them and I said no, I have to speak with an attorney to see what you're trying to do. Because in my lease it says you have to provide heat and hot water, I don't have to pay that. So I left and the attorney drafted something for me to get signatures from my building with – cause other folks had to go to the organization to get help. So I agreed and just went around my building and got 4 or 5 signatures of the families living here – I only got 5 because one woman said she was already moving that she didn't want to be a part of it. I said fine don't worry. With those five signatures I took them back to the attorney and he sent a letter to Albany to see what was happening. Albany told him to make sure we didn't sign anything, to not let them come into the apartments to put in the water heaters because he had already come in to lay the pipes – this woman was the one that didn't want to sign – the pipes were already set there and came down to my apartment. But what he forgot was that my son was a minor at the time when he did that installation. So I went to the attorney and he said I could sue him for doing that work without my permission and while in the presence of a minor. I called him the next day and told him, either you come and take out the pipes or we'll go to court. First, you're doing the work without my permission, and you came and did the work while a minor was there. Decide. I want those pipes out of my apartment. He came and got them out. And the only one that ended up with a water heater was her.

Gladys Puglia: and the other apartments for not fighting it – we had gone around telling them, my third floor neighbor and I went and told them to go to the organization, do this, and you'll see you don't have to take in the water heater. Now, I found out, my neighbor pays 150/200 in gas for that water heater.

Cynthia Tobar: So expenses went up for everybody.

Gladys Puglia: And this is the only building that doesn't have it – just the one apartment.

Cynthia Tobar: Wow.

Gladys Puglia: About three or four months ago another letter from Albany came through, that he was fighting for that money that supposedly is owed to him. And Albany denied him because the money he put in didn't justify what he did. They denied him.

Cynthia Tobar: Now that you have that experience and knowledge about your rights, what hopes do you have working with the organization and living in this neighborhood with respect to the changes - if like you said the people that are coming into the community what is it that they should know from long term residents, what hopes do you have for greater collaboration? Is there hope for collaboration with those groups that are coming in in order to fight against those changes, that injustice that not only affects the Latino community, but all the newcomers?

Gladys Puglia: I tried with some of the people that had come in at the time and they just said, "No, because I'm just here for a short time, I don't have time, and I'm not interested". And all I ask of those people that are coming into the area, other places, that they do their research, that they get the history of their apartment – there's what is it – 155 Hanson it's called the DHCR. You can ask for rental history of the apartment and you can see if the rent that they're charging you is right or if they're overcharging you. I urge people to look into that and take advantage of it so that they know what the previous tenant paid and if they're paying more, double, or triple. So they should do the research because in the end it'll help their pocket. That way they can take them to court and lower their rent. Because what they'll do is make these changes to the apartment – and there's no receipts to justify the rent increases. But if you take them to court they have to investigate and once they start investigating they have to give proof – whether they spent or not. After that, if you've been living there 5 or 6 months paying rent – they can get you what you've overpaid. All I'm saying is that if people don't fight for their rights everyone is going to have to keep moving from neighborhood to neighborhood because the rent will keep going up. The same thing that happened in Manhattan is going to happen in Brooklyn, in Queens, everywhere you go. Because that's what's happening now.

Cynthia Tobar: But you're an inspiration!

Gladys Puglia: I say this because I try to fight – I want to get my kids out of the house, but they can't afford a rent out there, not even myself! I can't pay this rent anymore; I have to find someone to rent with to help me out. The situation is tough. Being a single parent – I can't do it by myself.

Cynthia Tobar: What is your hope for the future? In 5 or 10 years, do you think you'll still be able to make it and hold on to a place in this city?

Gladys Puglia: Like I said, people are going to have to rent out all the rooms and live out of the living room. The owner of the apartment can stay in the living room with the kids and rent out the rooms in order to make the rent. That's the only way that I see – that'll I'll have to do in 5 or

6 years because if this doesn't stop – we've fought to stop the rent hikes, to stop that baseline of 2500 that the owners take advantage of and push past leaving it out of control. I don't know if the politicians listen to what we're saying in Albany, telling them to get rid of that baseline, the *NCI?* help these owners increase the rent, get rid of the tax credits for having low income housing – cause that's a lie, having 10-20% - what's 10-20%, about 100 apartments, nothing. We've asked them to make it 50% - 60% of those buildings for low-income families and they've said no only 10-20% it's nothing. We need a lot of apartments for low-income people. If you give us – they say we don't take care of the apartments, if you don't fix them how are we destroying what you haven't fixed? If you don't fix broken pipes it's going to leak down into other apartments. They want us to do the repairs. Why? I've made repairs in this apartment that's the only reason it's been maintained and they say we ruin the apartments and we try to take care of them not destroy them. We try to maintain what they neglect. But it's not sustainable. Because if we have to pay rent, we don't have money for paint, for plumbing, for the bathrooms. We don't have the money for it all cause then we don't have money to feed our kids. And those people that have kids won't have the money to clothe their kids. Where are we going to end up like that? They have to do their part too. Make repairs, do the upkeep.

Cynthia Tobar: Yes, yes. At the end of the day, how do you characterize the impact of your work, being a volunteer, your participation in the organization on your life and the way you think?

Gladys Puglia: Impact – how it impacts – how –

Cynthia Tobar: Yes, how, what impression has it made in your life?

Gladys Puglia: Mine is – well, I grew up with illiterate grandparents and I was the same before coming into the organization, I was ignorant of issues, I didn't have the information that you needed to defend yourself. The impact its made – I've learned a lot and that's what I try to pass on to others and I see what I've learned they pick up and I feel fulfilled because they're fighting with everything they learn from you. And those meetings we don't just sit and listen we're also participating and sharing your experience so they can see that it's possible to get ahead, that you can win, that you can put up a fight, that coming together you can win – but to always seek out help if they see they're struggling, look for that help don't just stand there, don't get kicked out of your home, don't let the person that's trying to hurt you win. There's help. There's many community organizations that want to help, all you have to do is look for them, listen and get involved. But if you don't go out and look you'll lose and you'll lose a lot. What I see is that from looking for that help I've made it, I'm still here, I'm not out on the street as tough as it is, I'm still living here, I'm still fighting the good fight. We've won some battles but they're still trying to get me out and I'll keep fighting. And thanks to the organization to the attorneys that have helped out I've had great legal representation in court. And like I said if the organization can't help they refer you to law firms that can, so don't despair. Just keep fighting, look for the information, for spaces, if you don't know how to go online ask your kid they know more than you! I say that for the adults because many will say, "I don't know how to use a computer!" But your kid knows, let them help you and seek out that help. Gentrification has helped the area, but in terms of housing it's destroyed us, it is destroying us. Like I said when I moved here this neighborhood was all children you'd see 50-60 kids on the block now you don't see a single one.

Cynthia Tobar: Now the majority are?

Gladys Puglia: Anglos, students, and you don't see – few Latino families are left. They don't want to rent out to Latinos - with children anymore. That's the problem we're facing now. I just want to tell the people that are moving in, do your research look into your apartment's rental history and make sure the rent you're paying now is what you're supposed to be paying. If not fight it out in the court and tell them to charge you what you're supposed to pay. Because the people that are moving in are overpaying. The families downstairs had a 600-800 dollar rent and now that apartment is 2500. It's unbelievable that in a matter of years the rent has gone up like that. No.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you so much Gladys for having us in your lovely apartment, thank you so much.

Gladys Puglia: Of course!