

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of an interview with Joshua Carrera by Cynthia Tobar on January 30, 2016 in New York City. This interview is part of "Cities for People, Not for Profit": Gentrification and Housing Activism in Bushwick. Joshua Carrera has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. 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.

### Joshua Carrera

[Start of recorded material 00:00:00]

Cynthia Tobar: So thank you for being a part of the project. It's Saturday, January 30, 2016, and I'm here with Joshua Carrera. Can you tell me your title and your affiliation with the neighborhood?

Joshua Carrera: Yes. So my name is Joshua Carrera and I grew up in this neighborhood. I spent my formative years in this neighborhood. But yeah, I grew up in New York City, spent my formative years in Bushwick, and then my family was evicted in 2006, and then we moved. Through that eviction we were homeless for a year. We were in a shelter here in Bushwick and then – ten months actually. And then after those ten months we found an apartment on the border of Ridgewood and Bushwick. So I grew up on Decatur between Wilson and Knickerbocker. And then after that eviction, ten months later we ended up on Wyckoff and [Stefan] off the Halsey L. Two years from then and that was in – so we ended up in that apartment in 2007. No, excuse me, 2006. And then two years later I go to college and my mom stays in that apartment but then she gets evicted again in 2014. And then after that she ends up in Jamaica, Queens. So that's a little bit of my connection to Bushwick.

Cynthia Tobar: So tell me a little bit about your background and your childhood and where your family's from and how you guys came to Bushwick initially.

Joshua Carrera: Absolutely. So I was born in a hospital. It's either the Upper East Side or Spanish Harlem. It's like the border. There's a hospital up there like around 96th Street or one on Third. So I was born there and then – so backtracking a little bit. My family's from Ecuador. So my mom got to New York City in the '80s with the help of her father. Then she went back to Ecuador and got pregnant with my father – I mean, excuse me, my father got her pregnant. And she decided that she wanted for her son to be born in the U.S. so I could have a better life here.

So she comes in 1990. I'm born. Within a year she realizes that she doesn't have enough resources to take care of me. So she doesn't know English. She doesn't have a job. She's a single parent like all by herself at the age of 28. Yeah, she's 28 in 1990. She's pregnant with me. She's all alone, doesn't know English, doesn't have a job. So she decides to send me to my family in

Ecuador until she gets herself settled. So for four years - I spent four years of my childhood in Ecuador.

Cynthia Tobar: What city?

Joshua Carrera: Milagro, which is 40 minutes east of Guayaquil so it's on the coast. So at the age of four, in 1994, she's like settled enough. She speaks English. She has a job. She has an income. She brings me back at the age of four. So at the age of four we end up moving – she was living in Washington Heights at the time. But she decided okay, my son's coming back. We need our own apartment. So she finds an apartment for us in LeFrak City, Queens. So from the age of four to the age of nine, I lived in LeFrak City. And then we decided we wanted a bigger apartment. She was getting pregnant. She got pregnant with my younger sister around that time so she was like we're going to need a bigger apartment.

So in 1999 she finds an apartment in Bushwick. Another thing that catalyzed that moving was that when we were living in LeFrak City she was going through a domestic violence case. And through that domestic violence case, she had a boyfriend at the time that was beating her up. Through that she got Section 8. So we found a really good affordable Section 8 apartment in Bushwick and we moved there in 1999. By that time I was nine. My sister, she was pregnant with my sister. My sister was born in 2000. Her name is Andrea. And yeah, we lived – we'd been in Bushwick and Ridgewood since 2000, since 1999.

Cynthia Tobar: And the first apartment with the Section 8 housing, where was that located?

Joshua Carrera: That was on Decatur between Wilson and Knickerbocker, 1263 Decatur Street.

Cynthia Tobar: Tell me about that apartment.

Joshua Carrera: So I remember -

Cynthia Tobar: And how old were you?

Joshua Carrera: I was nine when we moved to Bushwick. I remember the first day like we found that we got the apartment in Bushwick. And my mom at the time had a car so she's like I'm going to show you, like I'm going to like let's go see the apartment. So we drive to this block in Brooklyn. I mean I'm getting very loose from thinking about it because it's just been so long since I had this memory and since I thought about this memory. But we drive up on the block and it's just like it's booming with life. Because where, like I don't know if you've been to LeFrak City but LeFrak City is towers. It looks like housing projects so that was always like my – when I think about my childhood I think

of that environment. Like these big towers and not a lot of like open space for people to interact with each other.

So when we showed up on this block in Bushwick everybody was just outside. It wasn't like towers and towers around us. So I remember showing up and like getting to the block and everybody was just out. It was so busy and full of life. But it also felt, it felt scary, like I just hadn't had an interaction with New York City like that. And I think part of it it was just because there was the realization that like oh, this is going to be our new home and I don't know anyone here. So I think it was like more of like showing up to somewhere. It's kind of like when you show up like the first day of school or daycare. Like you show up to this already established community and you feel weird. You know, you're like the new kid on the block. So I remember like that feeling when I showed up on the block when my mom showed us.

And then she showed me the apartment. It was a railroad style apartment and she was like this is where we're going to live, you know, for the rest of our lives. So then, so yeah, then we just moved. And then yeah. Did I answer your question?

Cynthia Tobar: Yeah. Tell me about the community. Tell me about the school that you went to at the time and talk about life there.

Joshua Carrera: So when we moved to this block on Decatur between Wilson and Knickerbocker, it felt scary because it was so loud. People were really rude, some people. So it just felt like a really scary place. It ended up being a really scary place in the sense that I was so scared to go to the local school, whatever, elementary school, middle school that I was zoned for - no, elementary school, that I decided to continue going to the elementary school around LeFrak City. So for two years, fourth grade and fifth grade, I took three buses for two years.

Cynthia Tobar: What years were those?

Joshua Carrera: That was 1999, 2000, 2011 – no, excuse me. '99, 2000 and 2001 I took three buses. It was the B20, the Q55 and I think the Q29 or the Q38. And that goes through like, it goes from Bushwick to Ridgewood, through Fresh Pond, through Glendale. Like that corridor was my life for three years because I didn't want to go. The neighborhood felt really rough and scary so I was like I'm not going to go to the elementary school here. So I graduated from elementary school and I was like I can't keep doing this. I'm going to go to middle school in Bushwick. And between those three years that I was commuting to elementary school I made friends on the block and they were all going to the same middle school. So that also made it really comfortable to make that decision was that I was going to go to this middle school and that was Halsey 296, IS 296.

I think it's on Eldert and – I forget the cross street. I think Central. So that made it easy, the fact that I had these friends on the block that were also going there. So I didn't feel like I was going to go alone. But in 2001 middle school starts and it ended up being really scary. I ended up – it was three years of being bullied. That school was predominantly black and Puerto Rican and a little bit Dominican so like if you weren't Dominican or Puerto Rican, the kids thought everybody was Mexican. If you were Latino, you were classified as Mexican. And Mexican was like a really dirty thing. So I went through a lot of bullying, a lot of jokes around being called an illegal. I went through like this like huge identity crisis in which I wouldn't say that I was Ecuadorian. And yeah, and then so outside of school on the block I made an amazing group of friends.

At the time they felt amazing. It was like a group of like seven of us like guys on the block. There was this one guy. His name was Larry. And he was like five or six years older than us so we were 11 and he was like 16. And he was this black guy. He was a Blood or allegedly a Blood. And there was this really weird dynamic in which he like – it was like kind of abusive because he would like treat us really well and then like bully us and then with the promise that he was going to make us a Blood. But all of us, like the 11 year olds, saw him as a cool guy because on the block like everyone knew him. Like he [peaced] everyone with gang signs. He was just that guy. So we all looked up to him but it was a really weird relationship the way he bullied us but also loved us at the same time. It was weird.

So that was my like childhood growing up in Bushwick. Like being really traumatized at school but then feeling safe and also scared on the block. And then – so that was the block, that was school. Then at home, home was like another interesting time in Bushwick growing up because at that time my mom got pregnant with my sister in 2000. The father, which is a different father than my father, ends up leaving my mom. He runs away from Florida – he runs to Florida. And he lies in court about his name so the name he put on my sister's birth certificate wasn't his real name. So we went through this crazy court case trying to get child support. So that was like one really messy situation. I think being pregnant twice with a different man really depressed my mom and it was really hard on her.

And apparently I was like really jealous so I was going through a lot of depression at the time. Apparently I was jealous that there was someone else in the family, which was my sister. So I was really abusive, like I always threatened to hit her. I always threatened to like kill myself. This happened from like age 10 to like maybe 15. So then the household was like a very – like when I look back on it I was definitely depressed but I think it was because my mom was depressed. That she was alone. It was just me, her and my sister. Sometimes my grandma would pop in the picture. She lives in

Ecuador. She has a hardware store. So there was that. I also think looking back – I was telling a friend this the other day because I walked by the block where we first got evicted. Was that every time we would go pay the rent, the landlords, they were these two Russian dudes.

They had a basement kind of like this, your set up. They have a basement. So once a month we would go down and pay the rent and they would always make these dirty sexual jokes. And they had like posters of naked women all around. And it's crazy. Like when I look back on my childhood on my teen years, I never questioned it. I never thought. I never realized wow, like these guys. They know that I come down here once a month and they have these posters up. And I also never – I internalize a lot of the misogyny that they put on my mom. And now that I look back I'm like oh, that wasn't – like that's crazy. And my mom never like told me anything and I don't know if it was because she was trying to protect me or guard me. But what I guess I'm trying to say is that that was another part of my experience in Bushwick.

Having two landlords that were very sexist, were very – yeah, they were misogynist. And that was around me like all the time but I internalized it. I never questioned it. That was one thing. A third thing growing up was that at that time on that block there was a lot of drugs. There were a lot a lot of drugs. But the crew that I had the seven of us, even the gang leader Larry, like we weren't involved. We never like – we were never attracted to drugs. But it was all around us. And Larry was connected to all the people that sold drugs on the block. But growing up there were two shootouts which were really scary. One of them the guy upstairs got shot on the corner, on the corner from where we live and his brains were scattered for like three or four days. They were just left there. That was one shootout.

There was another shootout when I was in school. But my mom was – she said it happened as she was getting into her car and like the shootout happened and she jumped into her car and it was like one of the scariest moments of her life. There was a third time where Larry had this friend named Columbia who was like a big time drug dealer in the neighborhood. And one time someone was going to come on the block and like shoot him up. So Larry told like the crew of us to like go into our apartments. And within like 30 seconds a whole block cleared out and everybody went into their apartments. So those were like other things that I remember from my childhood, just how dangerous it was. I got robbed twice. I almost got robbed for my sneakers. I got robbed for my jacket. I got robbed for my Yu-Gi-Oh cards, which were like these playing card games.

What else? The block parties were really fun. Like the summer, a big part of my summers in Bushwick I remember was like hip hop and people blasting their music. Like that was like that's where my love for hip hop comes was those summers where like everyone's just blasting their music. Yeah.

Cynthia Tobar: And the other neighbors in the building where you lived, they were all coming from the same backgrounds or different backgrounds?

Joshua Carrera: Yeah. So next to us there was a black lady. Her name was Ramuda. She had two daughters, Sabrina and I forgot the other, the little one. Sabrina was like my age, like 11, whatever. She was my age. And then the little girl was like maybe like eight or nine. And they had a very abusive husband. Like the guy would beat them up all the time and he would come in and out of jail. Like on the block his name was Homicide. But my mom named him 50 Cent because he was always asking her for 50 cents. He was always drunk, always, always drunk. I was terrified of this guy. Like he would just like pull me at random times and just like tell me to shut the fuck up. He would just like curse at me for no reason. One day I was prank calling this girl that I liked and then he overheard me and I was home alone. And he knocked on my door and he was like if you talk to women like that I'm going to fuck you up.

It was just so abusive the way this guy talked to me. I was really scared of him. I was scared that he was going to like kidnap me or beat me up. I was just really terrified of him. So that was next door to us. And then upstairs from us – this was a three story building but there were only three families there growing up so all those apartments were vacant. Upstairs from me was I think it was a Puerto Rican family. And that family, they were really nice. They were really cool. But the mother, it was a mother, a daughter and a son. And the son was the one that got shot on the corner and his brains were just there for like three days and they didn't clean it up. So that was who lived in my building. And we were all friends. We were closer to the black family because they lived right next to us, but yeah.

Cynthia Tobar: And then tell me about the next place you moved to from the eviction. Tell me a little bit about that.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah, so right. So in 2006 we go through this eviction.

Cynthia Tobar: So how long were you in that apartment for?

Joshua Carrera: I guess we moved there in '99 so one plus seven years.

Cynthia Tobar: And what was the cause of the eviction? Like what happened?

Joshua Carrera: So I don't completely understand it. So I'm going to tell you from what my mom's told me but it's really fuzzy. Apparently the landlord, the two Russian dudes, wanted my mom to move to the apartment across the street. I don't understand why. But they were going – apparently, they were going to court for a few months because Section 8 apparently stopped sending payments to the landlord. So my mom somehow saved up enough money to cover all the

Section 8 payments that they didn't get. But then one day she lost all that money and then that's to the extent. Like my mom tries to explain it and she just jumps all over the place. That's all I know. That she lost the money and they went to court for six months. And I remember – the day the eviction happened, we were coming – I think at the age of 14 or 15 we started seeing a counselor together because the fights were so bad, the depression was so bad between me and her.

So we were seeing this counselor in Manhattan and it was on Tuesday. It was like we'd see the counselor every Tuesday. But one Tuesday we come home and it's like a normal day. It's like a regular day. We come home. We're happy. We had a good session. And we get to the door and there's this big – there was like this yellow sign and it had like so much tape on it. I remember that yellow sign so clearly. I don't remember what it said but it was an eviction notice. We entered, yeah, we entered the building and our door is the first door as you entered the building. And we look at the sign and she's reading it and then she tries to put the key in and it doesn't open. And then I just remember being really confused. Like what does this mean? And I think she knew what it meant but she wasn't telling me. So she was like yeah, we got to go sleep upstairs.

So we slept with the Puerto Rican lady and we were there for three days. And in those three days I overheard her telling all her friends, calling all her friends. Yeah, there's been an eviction. The marshal already came. The doors are locked. We have to find a place to live. And so three days later we go to Hunts Point I think it was. That's where they were telling my mom to go to get a shelter. So we go to Hunts Point. But the other place that we lived at – so we get evicted from there. We're homeless. We're in the shelter for ten months and we end up literally three blocks down on Wyckoff and Stefan. But that's the border of Ridgewood and Bushwick on that side of Ridgewood and Bushwick. And like it clearly, the division is so clear because from Decatur between Wilson and Knickerbocker, like two blocks are residential. Then it becomes like super industrial factories.

And then once you get to Wyckoff it's like all those like stereotypical Ridgewood houses. So we end up there and then that was also – so yeah. We end up there in 2006. And at first it was fine. It was nice. But over the year, like a year after moving in my mom starts having trouble with the landlord. And apparently, well, not apparently. He was always like after a year of living there he started flirting with her. This guy was married. He was like a 60 year old Chilean dude who lived on the first floor and we lived on the second floor. But a year after living there she started – he started flirting with her. He would like not fix things. He was just really weird. And that happened until she got evicted in 2014.

Cynthia Tobar: So how long were you in that apartment then?

Joshua Carrera: So I was only there – so we moved there in 2006. But then in 2008 I was going to college. So I was only in that apartment for two years.

Cynthia Tobar: But your mom and your sister lived there.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah, until 2014. So yeah.

Cynthia Tobar: And what was the reason for the eviction this time?

Joshua Carrera: This time – I don't remember. I think it was – I think this time around she was responsible for the eviction because I think in order to get like an emergency Section 8 transfer I think that's how it works. It has to be like – if you want to move from your Section 8 apartment to another one, you have to get this thing called a transfer. And Section 8 has different ways to approve a transfer. The quickest way is if you're an emergency. If you're experiencing an eviction or I think it's like a life and death situation. So my mom wanted to get this transfer so I think they came to an agreement. You know, let's go through this court process. Let's create this scenario in which you can evict me so Section 8 will give me this transfer because you can't move without that transfer. And so I think that's what happened. I think that's how the story – she's like I don't understand it when she tells me.

But it was the same thing. The marshal shows up on January 17, 2014. And I was in grad school at the time in 2014. So yeah, I guess we were there since 2007, 2006, to 2014. So we were there for seven years. We were in Bushwick for seven years, Ridgewood for seven years, Ridgewood, Bushwick.

Cynthia Tobar: Yeah. You had shared a link with me where your mother was interviewed by the New York Times talking about, sharing some of her struggles with housing.

Joshua Carrera: Right.

Cynthia Tobar: And they actually do talk a little bit about the eviction, talking about how the landlord didn't want to participate in Section 8.

Joshua Carrera: Yes. Okay. Everything's coming back now. So what the landlord did – another thing that I think. You know what I think happened. I think the apartment failed a Section 8 inspection because he wasn't - he was refusing to do the repairs in the apartment. He was refusing to like put the garbage out, the bins out. So like a Section 8 inspector comes once a year to make sure that the apartment has all this criteria that Section 8 has for apartments. So I think he was like – one, he was like deliberately over the years just like not improving it. So she, my mom, was desperate. She was like let's work something out so that I can get out of here. Yeah. I forgot about that.

Cynthia Tobar: And how was this affecting your sister at that time since she was living with your mother at the time that you go through this?

Joshua Carrera: Yeah, so the first eviction in 2006 didn't impact my sister a lot. She was six at the time. She had no idea what was going on. And the first eviction impacted me really hard. Like I was really – I was even more depressed. I was ashamed. I didn't tell any of my friends that I was homeless or living in the shelter. But my sister, the first eviction didn't impact my sister. The second one hit her really hard because the second one, 2014, she was 14. So by that age she was like aware of what was happening. She was a freshman in high school.

Cynthia Tobar: What high school was she going to?

Joshua Carrera: So she goes to the same high school that I go to, which is a high school for – I went to the High School for Environmental Studies. It's a public school in Midtown. So she went – she goes to the same high school. That wasn't her first choice. Her first choice was LaGuardia because she's like into arts but she didn't get in. That's what the article was about, her trying to get into LaGuardia. So when they got evicted I was in grad school; three days later she texts me. She's like I'm really depressed. I want to kill myself. Mom is thinking about killing herself. I want to take these pills right away. And this was a month before me defending my thesis. So like I almost dropped everything because the thought of my sister killing herself.

Cynthia Tobar: Would you like us to stop?

Joshua Carrera: No, it's okay.

Cynthia Tobar: Take your time.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah, my sister wanted to kill herself because my mom wanted to kill herself.

Cynthia Tobar: We can stop. Let's talk a little bit about what your mom was doing. Take a few steps back. How she was making income to initially bring you here and how that transpired.

Joshua Carrera: Right.

Cynthia Tobar: Tell me about that.

Joshua Carrera: So when my mom sent me to Ecuador in 1991 in order to like get her roots, she landed on her first job, which was helping a business on 34th and Seventh right across from Macy's. There used to be like a leather, a store that sold leather goods, leather jackets, leather bags. So she was kind of like the person that helped the business owner. And there was this group of Pakistani men. So

she did that from 1991 to '95. That was her first real job in New York City and she loved it. The men there treated her really well. That's where she learned her English. It's crazy. My mom learned her English across from Macy's on 34th Street. So in 1995 she somehow – I don't know how she made this jump. But she made the jump to become one of those people that goes around and helps older people, kind of like a nurse at home.

So she landed that job through the Ridgewood/Bushwick Senior Citizen Center back when it was across from the Myrtle-Wyckoff L train stop. And they didn't have these like big fancy – it was way different back then. I think that was her first connection to Bushwick was in '95 when she landed this job although that job didn't necessarily have her - that job sent people like my mom to homes all over New York City. But it was like the headquarters, the office was in Bushwick. So she lands that job in '95 and she does that job up until I think it was – oh man. That article might say it, until when she had that job. But she had that job for a really long time. That's like the job she's had the longest in New York City. I think it was until 2003, 2004. Around that time she has an injury on the job, like she slips. Her back gets injured really badly.

And at the same time she's also suffering from depression because by this time my sister's already three or four. She's fighting like child support. You know, and Bushwick is just a rough time and a rough place at that time. So she has this injury and she's like I can't work anymore. And I think she decides to sue the company. But anyway my mom, I think she stopped working in 2004. It was either 2000 or 2004 because my mom has not been working since the early 2000s. So that's how she was making income in the city. It was through that leather business that she was helping out in and also being a nurse at home. So yeah, I think, I'm trying to think if she's had any other jobs.

Cynthia Tobar: And then the Section 8 housing was helping.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah, so Section 8. So the way we were able to pay rent was because she got Section 8 through this domestic violence case in the mid '90s. She was dating this like big time drug dealer. He was Dominican and she met him through some friends in the Heights, in Washington Heights in 1995. And they dated for like two years but then he got really abusive. He got addicted to drugs. He used to beat my mom up all the time. There was this one time where he – when we were living in LeFrak City, he hit my mom in the eye. And then one day we had parent teacher conference. So she takes me to school and I guess she doesn't cover her eye up and all the teachers become worried that I'm in an abusive home. So they decide to set up an appointment and bring my mom in and say hey, what's going on.

The night before that happened my mom prepares me. And she says hey, you know, we're going to tell the teachers that me and Henry, the Dominican drug dealer, were playing around. Yeah, we were just playing around. That's what we're going to tell the school. So that's what we told the school. But I knew, like I knew he was hitting her. So that becomes so violent that she decides to press charges and she goes to the cops. And then they put her – I think it's called a restraining order or something where he can't like be around us. But he still finds ways to sneak around us. So she ends up meeting, my mom ends up meeting this cop who like is the cop that gets put on our case. And that cop ends up becoming my sister's father. And so my mom thinks that he – his name is – I forget his name. Hector I think his name, my sister's dad.

My mom thinks that he stuck around, like he never really cared about my mom but my mom thinks that he got her pregnant and stuck around because he wanted to catch this guy that was abusing my mom. Because I think it was like he would get promoted or something. Like this was like a big deal to catch this drug dealer. He never ends up catching my mom's, you know, abuser boyfriend. He runs away to Florida. Then he gets, my sister's dad gets my mom pregnant and then also runs away to Florida. So it was a mess. It was really bad. So those are two examples of men just using my mom. So I think I was internalizing a lot of that abuse growing up. And then when we ended up in Bushwick, we have an abusive landlord. Because in LeFrak City we didn't have like – like a landlord didn't live above us or next to us or below us. But in Bushwick, the landlord lives downstairs.

So the landlord was another abusive man. There's this pattern in our family of like men being abusive. And then I think to some extent I exhibited that abuse as I started becoming a teenager because I would curse at her. I never hit her but there were times when I was close to wanting to hit her. Threatened to kill her, threatened to kill my sister, threatened to kill myself. So yeah, actually I got off track with the income question.

Cynthia Tobar: No worries.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah.

Cynthia Tobar: But I mean then the second eviction, your family's going through this and you're away at college. Do you want to talk a little bit about that time away getting your – where did you go for school?

Joshua Carrera: Yeah. So I went to middle school in Bushwick and I graduated middle school in 2004. And by then, so I was like, you know, like I told you before. I decided to do my final years of elementary in Queens and give school in Bushwick a try. I gave it a try and it was horrible because I got bullied. I was like if I stay here I'm not going to make it out of the hood, like I've got to get out. So when the high school, in eighth grade, students get like this massive

book of high schools in the city and it's a really fun process. So I was like I want to go to school. I want to go to school in Manhattan. This is my opportunity to get out of Bushwick. So I chose – I wanted to go to Townsend Harris in Queens because it was like a really well-known mixed science school. But I also wanted to get into one of the five specialized high schools but I didn't pass the test.

So I ended up getting into the High School for Environmental Studies. And I got to visit it and I was like oh my God. Like growing up in Bushwick and just not growing up in Manhattan, the city was like this giant, like it was like the capital. You know, it was like the center of everything. So the thought of like the next four years going to school in the city and like I saw it as an adventure. So I got into the High School for Environmental Studies. My freshman year was 2004. And it was like one of the best years of my life. I made my best friends. I got my first paid job. You know, back then the L was never crowded, literally like it was not crowded. It was also slower but that's okay. And so then I graduate. So then my junior year of high school this college comes to visit our high school. And that's the University of Vermont because they have a partnership in that they're – my high school was the first environmentally themed high school in the country.

So the high school partners up with the University of Vermont's College of Natural Resources. And I think they give a preference for students from my high school that want to pursue environmental studies. So they came. They told us about that partnership. I went to visit Vermont my junior year of high school and I was like oh, this is nice. And I could potentially get a free ride. Like let me consider it. So I applied my junior year. I mean excuse me. I applied my senior year. This was in 2008. And I got accepted to the University of Vermont. So in 2008 I go to UVM and I had a really hard time at UVM. It was really white. It was really not urban. I mean it wasn't rural either but it just wasn't diverse. I felt like there was no culture. I mean there was a culture but it was a really foreign culture to me. It was very much – it had this very hippy New England liberal vibe that was just super foreign to me.

I was used to like the fast pace of New York City, everyone just like being friendly. I mean everybody was friendly in Vermont. It was just different. So I had a really hard time my four years at Vermont. The first two years I was really lonely. I didn't really make any friends. I didn't make friends because I didn't – UVM was really segregated. Like there were 12,000 students. Four percent of them were students of color and the other 96 was white. So 96 percent of 12,000 kids were white. So it was segregated in the sense that students of color stuck with themselves and then there was a larger white population. So I didn't want to segregate myself but I also didn't want to assimilate so I ended up saying no to both groups and just did my own thing.

And then my junior year I was like I need to leave so I went abroad for a year. I went to South America, kind of to like rediscover my roots.

I met my father for the first time in Ecuador, which was whatever, like I'm indifferent towards the guy. And so senior year of college comes around; I come back from my trip. This opportunity comes up to get into grad school and I wasn't really ready. I wasn't like too interested in the school but part of the school the second year was in Mexico. So when I spent that one year abroad in undergrad I like developed this obsession for traveling the world. So I was attracted to the grad school option because I would spend the year in Mexico and also because I didn't have to confront the hardships that my mom was going through. I kind of was running away from my responsibilities to my family in New York City. So I was graduating UVM in 2012. This opportunity for grad school comes up and I take it. So I spend a year in Colorado and then a year in Mexico and then I finished. And then I graduated in 2014.

And while I was in Mexico the final year of grad school is when the second eviction was happening. And I knew that eviction was coming, like we were anticipating it but I was hoping that my mom would find a place before. I think we were dealing like six months or something like that. But she didn't end up finding a place and she got evicted in January 2014. And around that time while I was defending my thesis, I also landed an internship for that summer, the summer of 2014. So I had to be back to New York. I had to leave Mexico to come here in the time by the summer. And that was tricky because I was like oh, there's a possibility like that I might have to live on my own. Like every single time that I always, when I went away for college, every time I came to the city I always had my room. My mom always had an apartment. But this was the first time, my first time in my life. It was such a foreign thing to think wow, the city that I grew up in I might not have my own room.

So June 2014 comes around. My mom hasn't found an apartment and I have to stay at a friend's house. And then we fought a lot around that because she was living in a tiny – after she got evicted, she found a tiny, tiny. It was a room in a three bedroom apartment. It was like a block away from Knickerbocker. I think that block is Irving, right? It's Knickerbocker Irving. It was Irving and Green on top of a bodega. She found this - it was a three bedroom apartment. There was a tiny, tiny room. Like it was so tiny like you could only fit the mattress and one luggage thing. And it was her and my sister in that one tiny room. And apparently this was like a rat infested apartment so she was living there from the time she got evicted till the time I get back to New York City in June of 2014.

And I get back. We fight because I'm like how have you not found an apartment yet. And then I was also angry and depressed that I had to stay on couches. I never had to do that before. I always had my own room with my

family. So from June 2014 I start my internship. I'm staying on couches for a month. And then in the middle of July I find a one bedroom. I find a one room in a three bedroom apartment in Crown Heights. That was a fascinating experience for me because I had never been to Crown Heights growing up. And it was like wow, this is like such a different part of New York City. But I also felt really lonely.

Like it was my first time I was so far removed from my family. I didn't know anyone in Crown Heights. I had no connections to the neighborhood. I felt super – I felt like this wasn't, like New York City didn't feel like mine because I didn't have control over where and being with my family essentially. So I find a room in the middle of July in 2014 and then a month later my mom finds an apartment in Jamaica, Queens, where she's at now.

Cynthia Tobar: So your sister's living with her there.

Joshua Carrera: Mm hmm. My sister's living with her. The lease expired in September, this past September 2015. And we were scared that the landlord would start an eviction process but he hasn't. So we are, like we're okay, but we're also like in a somewhat vulnerable position. It could be worse but we're looking for an apartment that takes Section 8 preferably central Brooklyn. Not so far out there because my mom, you know, all my mom's friends are in Bushwick.

And my sister's commute to high school is an hour and fifteen minutes from Jamaica, Queens to Midtown. Jamaica's also really a messed up neighborhood. Like there's been two shootouts around where my mom lives. One lady literally a corner to the next corner from where my mom lives, some people ran up in the apartment and killed this old lady. This guy tried hitting on my sister and he was like a 30 year old guy. So it's just a really messed up neighborhood. So we're trying to get out of Jamaica. So that's where we're at now.

Cynthia Tobar: And you're still in Crown Heights or?

Joshua Carrera: I'm on the border of Crown Heights and Bed Stuy and my lease is up in June. I want to move back to Bushwick but I want to only move back if she moved back because I have this really weird relationship. I have a love and hate relationship with Bushwick because it's where I spent my formative years. It's where like when I think of my identity, Bushwick formed my identity. But nothing that I grew up with is here anymore. Like my mom's not here. The friends that I grew up with on my block, none of them live on that block anymore. I have no connections to it aside from memories. So that's why I would only live here if my mom was here, my mom and sister.

Cynthia Tobar: And so what are some of the challenges you encounter when people start talking about affordable housing in New York City and Bushwick, the things that you're echoing and all the things that you're sharing with us today.

Joshua Carrera: What are some of the challenges that I encounter in those conversations? I don't know how to answer that.

Cynthia Tobar: What have been some of the struggles you've experienced looking for affordable housing in Bushwick?

Joshua Carrera: Yeah. No one wants to take Section 8. So it's actually easy for me to find a place for myself because I as a young person can move around quicker and easier. I have income. You know, I have a good paying job.

Cynthia Tobar: You're not on Section 8.

Joshua Carrera: I'm not on Section 8, just my mom. Another thing that's like it makes it really easy for me that makes it extremely difficult for my mom is when you're finding an apartment especially if you're going through a real estate agency, they ask you for all these things. There's like a checklist of things. It's like proof of, like three paystubs, proof of income, employment history, credit check. And all those things I can check those boxes off comfortably. I have amazing credit. Like on paper the profile, like I fit that profile. But when my mom's trying to apply for places, her credit is horrible. She has horrible, horrible credit so that's one thing. And there's like the stigma around Section 8. You know, people tell me, like my housing activist friends and organizers, like they can't discriminate your mom because she has Section 8. Like it's against the law and all these things are against the law but they still happen.

And yes, we can go to court but it's such a dehumanizing process. So oftentimes my mom gets paralyzed and stops looking because she doesn't want to go through the illegal rejections. So what makes it really hard is that people don't want to take Section 8 and my mom has poor credit. That's what makes it really hard. And then a lot of – like the New York City government has like this website where they list all places that they know that takes Section 8. And all those places are like on the fringes of the boroughs. They're all by the beach. They're all in Jamaica. They're all the way uptown in the Bronx. All these neighborhoods that we have no ties to or connections to or friends. But even if we did like those neighborhoods are super inaccessible. They're just far removed from our experience, like our connection to New York City.

Cynthia Tobar: And so since coming back to New York and you've got your graduate degree, tell me about that journey. Tell me about what you've been doing since then.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah. So I got my undergraduate degree in natural resources planning and then I got my graduate degree was in conservation leadership. I pursued the path of environmentalism because I saw it as an opportunity to travel to these amazing places like the Amazon. I've been to the Amazon. I've been to the Indies. I've been to a lot of rain forests all throughout Latin America. But in retrospect I don't think I want to – the academic training that I received was for a specific type of environmental work and that's more like the traditional landscape ecology, conserving like those big places, those ecosystems. But that's not – I realized looking back. I'm learning now that that's not what I want to do. I care more about how the environment shows up like in our urban environments.

So I think about community gardens, open space, parks. That's where I'm more interested but my academic training hasn't prepared me for that. So I'm thinking of how to shift the kind of work that I do to get that training and then pursue something that looks at those things as like important amenities that are important to quality of life just as much as housing. Like how do we fight for housing and open space? So yeah, like academically like I haven't been trained for what I want to do but I'm working on getting there.

Cynthia Tobar: And so tell me a little bit about how you've and where you're doing now in regards to like what kind of work that you do and how are you involved with community work and your involvement in community work.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah. So I would say a lot of my community or all of my community work is involved in Bushwick. And part of that was when I got back from grad school in June of 2014 when I came back to New York City, I was hungry to get involved in addressing the struggles that we went through with housing in Bushwick. So I wanted to plug into the housing justice work and the gentrification work and to displacement work that was happening in Bushwick. So I guess my first introductory to activism around that was around the time that the People's Climate March happened, there was this one specific group that was focused on housing justice. It was like the housing justice block for the People's Climate March.

Cynthia Tobar: And when was that?

Joshua Carrera: That was December of 2014. So I found out about that group. It was called the Housing and Anti-Displacement Contingent and I became along with that group responsible for organizing and representing that issue at the People's Climate March. So through that organizing, that was my first time being an organizer, I met a lot of people in the housing justice world but that was citywide. But through that I started meeting people in Bushwick because a lot of the organizing was happening here in Bushwick out of Mayday. Mayday gave space to the People's Climate Arts, which was producing all the art for the People's Climate March.

Cynthia Tobar: Tell me more about Mayday.

Joshua Carrera: So yeah. So Mayday is a social justice hub, a movement hub, a community center routed in this idea that social justice movements need space, need a home in order for us to organize, to dream, to scheme, to vision. And so Mayday was founded on that principle, that in the city with increasing rents, movements and spaces like this are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, to have. Just the rent crisis is making it extremely unaffordable to have these really important spaces for us to come together and organize. So that's why Mayday came about, was that we need a home, a place for social justice and a place for movements. So it's been an incubator of movements essentially and the People's Climate March was a part of that. But now, fast forward to now, after the march was over, we lost the space where we were originally at and found a new space next to a church.

So since then we've been developing our different programmatic tracks because we don't want to be just – we want to be a local resource and destination but also a citywide and national and international destination for movements. But I've been, so I got invited to be part of the collective this past summer of 2015. And what I've been bringing to the space is making sure that one of our programmatic tracks is housing justice in the anti-displacement work. And I've been doing some really cool stuff on that, bringing in people from Bushwick that grew up in Bushwick, organizers to create programming around that.

Cynthia Tobar: Can you give me some examples?

Joshua Carrera: Yeah, so one example is right now we have – we are in the process of forming a grass roots tenants' clinic. So we haven't formalized a name yet. Originally we called it a tenant clinic. Now I think we're going to call it an [Spanish – 00:51:48]. And the idea behind this tenant clinic is that we want to mobilize long term Bushwick residents from a grass roots level to address the housing crisis in the neighborhood and not be tied to, you know, a specific group or a funder. We want it to be super grass roots and we're inspired by the Crown Heights Tenant Union model. It's organized by building and is super grass roots and militant and they mobilize. So that's kind of the vision we have for this tenant project. We still need to get specifics on how do we do that. The great thing about – the thing that excites me about this project is that in the group, the people that are leading it are long term Bushwick residents. They're also organizers.

So some of them come from Make the Road or used to work at Make the Road. Some of them come from Casa. Some of them come from Housing Court. We have someone that works at Housing Court. And it's great because not only do we have, you know, people that grew up in the neighborhood and

know the neighborhood, but they also have the skills to organize. They're organizers. So that's one project. Another project that we launched around this track of housing justice was a group of us in fall of 2015 decided to create this activism project, combining activism and art to bring awareness and elevate the voices of those being displaced right now. And that was called, that project is called Illumination Against Gentrification, Mi Casa No Es Su Casa.

And the way we did that was that we, in collaboration with the New York City Light Brigade, we created these signs that had these LED lights that displaced messages around, anti-displacement messages, anti-eviction messages, anti-gentrification messages. But really it was like we would put up these light signs all throughout the neighborhood as a way to like illuminate the issue of gentrification. And we would identify long term residents that would be willing to put up the sign outside of their window as a form of protesting, as a form of elevating their voices, as a form of bringing awareness. And we also knew that it would just be something really catchy and attractive that people would rally around. And that's exactly what happened. We raised \$1,600 in one week to be able to create 40 signs. And then we launched in December. We put up signs all around the neighborhood. We got a lot of press.

And now we're thinking about phase two. In phase two we wanted this to be a citywide project. So we're looking to connect with other housing justice groups around the city but also neighborhoods that know the wave is coming. So places like the South Bronx, East New York, so yeah.

Cynthia Tobar: How has working on these projects changed the way you engage in activism and how you relate to the community.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah. It's made me realize the potential that I have as an organizer to bring people together for a cause. So that's been like a huge realization of myself. Like I never knew I had that as a skillset, the power of my story, the power of connecting to other people that are going through this because I've experienced it. So it's made me realize that I have this really important skill and that I'm like able to authentically connect to people, to mobilize them and bring them together to fight about something that's impacted me and my family. So that's one way. But yeah, I think that's probably like the most important way.

Cynthia Tobar: At the end of the day how would you characterize the impact that all this work has had on your life?

Joshua Carrera: I guess on my life the way that this work has impacted my life is there's two ways. One I'm really inspired that I can bring people together to get something done. At the same time it's also really scary because I'm becoming much more aware of how tremendous and giant the fight is. And it's daunting. It's daunting. When we would think about housing justice and we think about

we're going, we're up against a systematic problem, one. And then when we think about the culprit, I think of the culprit as, you know, this real estate industry that's massive and powerful and giant. So I'm inspired in one way just like on a personal level talking to people and organizing and fighting. But when I look back to remember what we're fighting against, it's also really daunting.

And so what I think I need to do is I still need to spend more time figuring out my personal philosophy around how we fight this housing crisis. So there's two ways I think about it. I think about it from the anti-displacement lens and I think about it from the anti-gentrification lens. And those, depending which way you think about it, those are two completely different strategies and ways to think about the crisis. And I'm still struggling with which one I identify more with.

Cynthia Tobar: Can you tell me a little bit about the difference between the two?

Joshua Carrera: Yeah. So for me when anti-gentrification rhetoric is used, it speaks to the lived experience and what we feel emotionally. But it can also be very divisive because it creates this – it brings up the dichotomy of the oppressed and the oppressor. Who's being impacted the most by the housing crisis? Who is causing the housing crisis? And oftentimes it becomes like a conversation around long term residents being displaced and a lot of anger gets put towards the white newcomers, the young white Millennials, trust fund kids. And it immediately creates that dichotomy. Whereas when I think about it from an anti-displacement point of view philosophy, the conversation becomes more around housing for all. Housing is a human right.

And then I try to draw – I try to think about how my role models and heroes would think about it. So I think about MLK a lot and Malcolm X. Those are like my two people that I draw inspiration from. And I'm like yeah, what's the unifying message? What's going to bring us all together to fight for this? But at the same time, how do we create a movement or a vision that acknowledges who's being impacted the most. So I don't know. I'm still struggling I guess. On certain days I'm like I'm talking more from an anti-displacement lens. And on other days I'm like gentrification is neo-colonialism because that's what it feels like. It feels that way when Bushwick is branded as this like cool place to be an artist, like it literally feels that way.

Cynthia Tobar: And tracing back to your early childhood days, the people that you grew up with on that block, everyone's gone?

Joshua Carrera: Everyone's gone.

Cynthia Tobar: No one's there?

Joshua Carrera: No one's there.

Cynthia Tobar: Have you been back to that block since to see how it looks?

Joshua Carrera: Yeah, so since we first got evicted in 2006, I would go periodically like once a year, once every two years. I would always just walk through that block just to reminisce. In college I started being more intentional going to that block. Like every time I would come visit home from like a Thanksgiving break or whatever when I was an undergrad, I would because the block was only three blocks away. So I would go with the hope that I would one day bump into my landlord and get his side of the story, our ex-landlord, one of the two racist and sexist Russian dudes. So I did that for like six years and I finally bumped into them last spring. Last spring I bumped into them because – so what happened was Northwest Bushwick Community was working with the New School on this project to map all the vacant land in Bushwick.

I think it was to create like a policy memo around could we potentially create affordable housing in some of these spaces.

Cynthia Tobar: The Gazette?

Joshua Carrera: The Gazette, yeah.

Cynthia Tobar: I have copies.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah. And so they send out this like pitch to be like if you want, like long term and new term, you know, and new people in the community, join us on this joint project and help us map the vacant land. So we met up, like the Northwest Bushwick Community Group, the Parsons students and then like anybody that was invited. And we show up and then we break into different tracks.

Cynthia Tobar: Which group were you a part of that was invited?

Joshua Carrera: Northwest Bushwick Community Group.

Cynthia Tobar: Okay.

Joshua Carrera: They sent out the invitation.

Cynthia Tobar: But not your group that you are involved with was invited. You were individually.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I showed up and then everyone, like everyone is encouraged to pick a place in Bushwick that they want to go map. So I chose where I grew up just for shits and giggles. I'm like whatever. Maybe I'll bump

into my landlord. Who knows? So I got paired with two students from the New School. So that was also a really interesting experience, like walking with these two students. You know, they didn't grow up in New York City and it was weird like being in my neighborhood. And having like memories tied to all of those blocks. Here walking with these students. Anyway, it was just weird. But eventually we land on my block. Like we hit the corner and they're crossing the street for some reason. And I immediately like start looking at the building where we got evicted and I see this fat white dude and I'm like that's my landlord.

And I tell them right away. I was like yo, look who that is. That's my landlord. I'm going to go talk to him. And then we all get excited. And I show up like right outside. He's like watering plants. And I ask him, I'm like oh hey, Peter. Do you remember me? Can I talk to you? And he has no idea who I am. He's like who are you? And I'm like do you remember [Alicia]? And at first he was like confused. And I was like oh, she used to live here up until 2006. I'm her son. And then he's like oh yeah. Like it all starts coming back to him. And then I started getting really nervous. Mind you, this was last year so that's 2015. So I hadn't seen the guy in nine years. And so I start getting really nervous and I'm like hey. I'm with some students from the New School and we're doing this project mapping vacant lots around the community.

And this is crazy that you're here because I just was wondering if you had a few minutes because I just wanted to ask you about what happened in 2006 when we went through the eviction. And then he immediately got angry and he said – he didn't address my part of the answer, my part of the question. But he went on this whole rant about how - I think I was like. Oh, I think what I said before he started was that I was like it was a really traumatizing experience for us. And I just want to get your side of the story because again, my mom's story always felt fuzzy. So then he went on this rant about how he played a key role in cleaning up the community and cleaning up the block. And he didn't feel bad about the eviction. He said that, you know, he had been a building owner. He owned that building since the '70s. So he said look, like I've been here since the '70s.

This neighborhood has always been crazy, wild and dangerous. There were always animals running around this block and the entire block and I did what I had to do. And then I reacted to the animal piece. I was like well, not all of us, you know, wanted to burn the neighborhood or sell drugs. And I don't think anybody that I knew in my neighborhood was an animal. My mom was certainly not an animal. I wasn't an animal. My friends weren't an animal. And then at that point like I don't remember any more because I was like I was really nervous. I was stuttering. But he started becoming really aggressive. I think he was cursing, like trying to justify his usage of that word. But then the New School students stepped in and they were like hey man. Like that was kind of racist.

And then he said like after – between when I don't remember and when the New School stepped in saying that, calling him out on his racism, that was maybe like four minutes that I don't remember. But the New School student dude stepped in and said that was racism. And then he said, you know what, get the fuck off my property. I don't want anything to do with you guys. And the New School student was like we just wanted to talk to you. You know, we just wanted to have a friendly conversation. And so then we walked away. And then it was just really quiet between us three for like two or three blocks. So that was a really traumatizing experience and at the time I didn't think it was traumatizing. Like I didn't think it was like that I was triggered and impacted by it.

But at the end of the day we had like – we all met together to share how the day went and I started crying. And I realized oh, wow, this really did impact me. And what was really disappointing was I was not aggressive with him at all, like I was really friendly. I wasn't trying to accuse him of anything. I literally just wanted his side of the story and I guess I got his side of the story. But I wanted to know like the specifics and the technicalities as to what caused the eviction. Because I'm really trying to understand like why do these things keep happening? Is it something that we're doing because I could see my mom making mistakes? My mom is very scatterbrained. She's always depressed. She's just not there. And if that's the case then that means I just need to step in more and take control of the situation.

But if it's something like systematic shit or if it's something that the landlords are doing that's sketchy, then that's a different strategy for how we tackle these things. So I was really disappointed that I didn't get his side of the story. But what I did get some closure around was the fact that he really was racist. And the guy had not changed. He still carried this like really aggressive way. So that was really important to me was getting some closure around that. Because I know my mom can also be a very, like she sometimes instigates. And she sometimes – I think it's just a defense thing to be honest, but yeah. So that was really hard. That was really tough.

And this is even crazier. Three days later my mom was going to Housing Court by Jamaica, Queens for something with this current landlord. And as she's walking the steps, she sees him.

Cynthia Tobar: Who?

Joshua Carrera: The landlord.

Cynthia Tobar: The old one?

Joshua Carrera: Peter, the Russian racist dude. So like she sees him and she taps him. And she's like hey, like Peter, is that you? And she was like oh, hey, Alicia. And he's like super friendly with her. And it was like a really short conversation apparently. It was like small talk and then they went their ways. But that's crazy that that happened like three days after he saw me. So he was being – the guy's weird. The guy's weird and then that's also like a small world. Like what are the odds?

Cynthia Tobar: I think we're done. Do you have any final words before we wrap up? In closing?

Joshua Carrera: In closing. I guess in closing like there are days when I'm really inspired by the fight. And then there are days where I don't see how we can win. And that's really depressing. It's really depressing. So it's just, it's happening so fast. It's happening so fast. It's happening fast. It's happening faster than we can organize. That's what it feels like. I was just out in East New York yesterday for work looking at sites to do a community garden or vacant land. There's a lot of vacant lots in East New York. I'd never been out there before. But it's crazy how all this – there's so much new development popping up in East New York. So it's weird like when you hear about it in the news and social media but it's a way different thing to go out and physically see it. They're popping up everywhere.

And then what about what's also really discouraging is supposedly we're going to have a super progressive mayor that was going to fight the housing crisis. And it's been really slow. It's not affordable for the people that have historically lived in these communities. So that also really like is the – but then that makes me realize it has to be a grass roots. It has to come from the people is what I'm realizing. So in closing, I sometimes spend days thinking about what the city's going to look like for my sister because she's 15 now. She's growing up in a very different New York City than I grew up in. She's also a young girl. And I'm excited for her to turn 18 because I'm excited to have a partner in trying to help our family. I struggle doing it alone. So I'm excited for her to turn, yeah, for her to be older and help me.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you so much for sharing your story.

Joshua Carrera: Yeah.

[End of recorded material 01:11:12]