

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of a group interview with Leticia Paguian, Vicente Mayorga, Jose Luis Rodriguez and Rigoberto Silva by Cynthia Tobar on November 24, 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.

Leticia Paguian, Vicente Mayorga, Jose Luis Rodriguez and Rigoberto Silva

Cynthia Tobar: Good afternoon, it's November 25th, Thursday - we're here in the Make the Road NY Offices. We are here in the Make the Road NY offices in Jackson Heights with some activists from Make the Road NY who have also worked in the Bushwick location. It is the 25th of November it is a Thursday. Can you introduce yourselves by name and the role you have in the organization. Would you please state your name and the title in the organization starting over here.

Rigoberto Silva: Okay, my name is Rigoberto Silva. I'm a leader and member of the BASTA committee for tenants - for tenants' rights.

Jose Luis Rodriguez: Hi, my name is Jose Luis Rodriguez, i'm also a leader of the group. I've been involved with Make the Road NY for eleven years and we are part of the Tenants Association Rights Group and we are a group that entitles the tenants of their rights and especially who don't have documents so we are what you call a voice of the community and the people.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you

Leticia Paguian: Hello, my name is Leticia. I'm a member of Make the Road NY and we're here to participate and support the organization for our community and to educate ourselves so that we know the rights of our community in order to help. I have - I'm a member, a leader - I consider myself a strong leader helping the organization, and I try to teach our people in the community through my experience. My program, my committee that I'm involved in is on housing. Others that I've worked with - we have housing, immigration, labor, fraud, an endless, an endless number of committees to help the community with our knowledge. Thank you.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you for participating in the interview. We don't have a lot of time, but with what little time we do have, if you can I'd like each of you to share your thoughts on your work as an activist in fair housing with the organization. Any anecdote you'd like to share or experience. And if we have more time we can set a date for an interview with more time, less rushed and more in detail. But whatever experience you'd like to share in particular ones serving

the Latino community in Bushwick and your experience as activists and organizers for Make the Road - and Angel Vera is here by the way

Angel Vera: You're not recording

Cynthia Tobar: We are! It's okay, we're family here. Share whatever you'd like.

Rigoberta Silva: Well, just - don't be afraid, when you have a problem, a rent problem or with a problem with your landlord, there's a court that there to help, housing court. Don't be afraid of coming forward because it's there to help us and anyone who needs it, you have to lose that fear, come to Make the Road, and ask for help. Ask for help so that through our people in charge of the tenants committee we can tell you about your rights, the rights you have in order to defend yourself in court against your landlord whenever you have a problem.

Cynthia Tobar: Well thank you. Could you quickly tell me how many years you've been involved as an organizer and when you started?

Rigoberta Silva: Yeah, I have - going about three years in this organization. I'm a volunteer leader. I try - when I'm not working to help out in the organization, when I have a chance. And thanks to the organization it gives me an opportunity to help the community, taking the necessary steps to ensure that they'll be able to face any rent issues.

Jose Luis Rodriguez: Hi, I started in Make the Road New York in the Brooklyn Area ***English

Cynthia Tobar: And have you all lived in Bushwick as well or just organized in Bushwick?

Leticia Paguian: Well, I've lived in Jackson Heights for 38 years - I got here and it's been my area. I haven't participated in that part of Brooklyn, but in the marches we all come together. Be it in the Bronx, Brooklyn, here in Queens. That's the power of justice and of this organization that unites us behind our rights as tenants. Currently, what's happening here in Queens for example, the "whites" as we say in quotation marks, sorry, they're displacing us here in Queens. It's always been lovely here. But what's happening nowadays the country's economic situation is tough. To get an apartment you have income requirements of \$70,000. Who makes that - here - not even a couple, with children makes those \$ 70,000. That's what they ask for, good credit with a good job, and other endless requirements and for what? They come over from Manhattan, put up new buildings - I don't know if you noticed in Long Island City

Cynthia Tobar: Mhm

Leticia Paguian: That's all been taken. It's been taken - taken by who, by the rich. They're the ones that get it. And what happens to us? Where are we gonna go? With what kind of salary? A minimum wage salary of \$8.75 and we're struggling because it keeps going up. Expensive rent, expensive transportation, expensive food, clothing for the kids - it's expensive. Nobody bothered to consider a minimum wage increase to \$15 so that we can pay our rents. That's our struggle, why? Because it's too expensive. It goes up every year, but the salaries don't. How do we pay rent? If every two years you have to pay a percent increase. The fight we just had and won, for the 1%, was this year on October 1st. I just signed a one year contract. Aside from the fact that I wasn't receiving services like I should have - and I had the opportunity to make a complaint, because there was a list! There weren't any building maintenance services, nobody follows up on your requests - to fix the windows, to patch up a hole, the ceiling's coming down. You have to be assertive about it so they'll listen. Because we have the support of this organization, of these laws that are being created so that we can be heard, enough! Rent is too high, too high! So where are we going with our salaries? No one pays attention to us so of course we have to go out and protest and I'm one of them - we get out there and protest.

Cynthia Tobar: So what are some last words because I know you have a meeting to go to - What are some of the strategies for upcoming actions and campaigns you have planned for the year, it's November already, the end of 2015, what are you hoping for in 2016? Your goals as organizers in the fight for fair housing?

Jose Luis Rodriguez: For me the most important thing - in bold letters - is educating the community on how to take action - so this way they know how to protect themselves and know where to stand. Because - you it's, united we stand, divided we fall, but we are trying to educate the people that they stand with us together as we've been watching for many purposes, okay, we are well known, Make the Road New York. The senators, council member, council women, everyone else in the political landscape knows us very well because we do something very important and well noticed

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you, thank you. Any other thought before we finish?

Rigoberta Silva: Yes, what we have on the 16th

Leticia Paguian: Going to Albany?

Rigoberta Silva: No -

Cynthia Tobar: Plans for 2016?

Rigoberta Silva: Either to fight - or something we already won, on the improvements, benefits - how do you say -

Leticia Paguian: ***inaudible

Rigoberta Silva: No - to have everything better, how do you say, with a quality -

Leticia Paguian: Quality

Rigoberta Silva: Quality

Leticia Paguian: Quality of life

Rigoberta Silva: Quality of life

Cynthia Tobar: Quality of life issues

Rigoberta Silva: They have a lot of strategies too. For example, they kick someone out of the building

Leticia Paguian: Vacancy, vacancy

Rigoberta Silva: They give them money so they leave - they offer them money so they can bring someone else in and raise the rent

Leticia Paguian: Those apartments that are left vacant - that's the new strategy that we're trying to stop now. Make it reach Albany and lead to legislation. For example, let's say that I, for whatever reason I left my apartment that we've had for 35 years - they're rent controlled obviously - that apartment, that building, its rent is going to double, triple. Recently, my third floor neighbor left her apartment, they're supposedly "renovating" it. We've asked how much it costs, that one-bedroom is \$2500.

Rigoberta Silva: How much was it before?

Leticia Paguian: Before? Not even a \$1000! See how it tripled - it tripled. Their system consists of harassment, denial of services, manipulation of the water system for example, heating, not tending to leaking complaints. So those are the strategies they use until you get tired, tired, tired, tired and you leave. But now, I'm not leaving! Because I have the support of Make the Road and Make the Road is here. We're here and we're not going anywhere.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you so much

Rigoberta Silva: If we leave, we come back.

Leticia Paguian: If we leave, we come back.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you so much, thank you so much

Cynthia Tobar: So now we have another organizer that is here as part of the group. Can you introduce yourself, your name and your role in the organization?

Vicente Mayorga: My name is Vicente Mayorga, I'm a member of the organization. I live in Bushwick.

Cynthia Tobar: Mhm.

Vicente Mayorga: And the interesting thing is that I connected with Make the Road New York in 99 or 2000 and I know the Bushwick community very well. I've been living in the area for 21 years.

Cynthia Tobar: Mhm

Vicente Mayorga: Presently, our community, the displacement we're experiencing is very severe, very severe. There's a gentrification - what we call gentrification of our area, a devious plan, because it goes against our community, it's an attack on the working community. It's a dynamic, productive area with clothing manufacturers, a working community, people lived happily - but you started losing those home- those jobs all over bringing with it a depression

Cynthia Tobar: Can you tell me about those effects,

Vicente Mayorga: Well I -

Cynthia Tobar: Your personal experience? What you witnessed?

Vicente Mayorga: Well, I - I've seen that, and I could've fallen victim to it, but because I had the advantage of knowing my rights, I didn't let them drive me out of the building I was living in - because I have the support of the 18,000 members of this organization to stand up and say 'you're not kicking us out of here!'

Cynthia Tobar: Mm

Vicente Mayorga: And I didn't allow - I live in a rent stab- rent-controlled building

Cynthia Tobar: How many families?

Vicente Mayorga: We're six families.

Cynthia Tobar: Uh huh

Vicente Mayorga: It's six families, I organized for those families at the time -

Cynthia Tobar: What year was that? What year?

Vicente Mayorga: Basically, I started living there in 2000 - no before that, in '95

Cynthia Tobar: And you organized - the tenants, that started -

Vicente Mayorga: I organized the tenants outside of Make the Road, Make the Road by Walking back then

Cynthia Tobar: Yes

Vicente Mayorga: I did it on my own

Cynthia Tobar: Right

Vicente Mayorga: for our rights against the landlords that wanted to increase the rent exponentially. After, with the organization Make the Road by Walking - at that time - we started organizing. Currently, it's a harder because our community isn't aware of their rights and they fall victim to displacement and landlord-tenant harassment especially when it comes to rent control. Now, about the rent of private homes there the rent - when I first moved to the neighborhood twenty years ago, they would tell me you had to pay to go live in Bushwick. Because it was a neighborhood - where the working community and the poor lived. Now it's a community where people with money are living, because we have rent over \$3,000 for the same old houses.

Cynthia Tobar: Mhm.

Vicente Mayorga: And unfortunately we have to fight, to organize and have our rights respected, and so that the new buildings have at least fifty percent affordable housing. ***(inaudible) It's impossible to afford, even with a salary going up to \$15 the hour, you just can't pay rent. The main problem we have to deal with is overcrowding in housing. Two or three families have to share an apartment because it's impossible to afford rent.

Cynthia Tobar: Mhm

Vicente Mayorga: And that's inhumane.

Cynthia Tobar: Can you tell me how being involved with Make the Road gave you those strategies, the power to take your future in your hands?

Vicente Mayorga: The important part is to know your rights.

Cynthia Tobar: Mhm

Vicente Mayorga: And the only way to know your rights is by being organized. Make the Road by Walking back then, today Make the Road New York, through committee efforts at its base - I was part of the committee work, for housing, parents, workers - so in those meetings, that environment you learn what your rights are, your rights as tenants of course. That's the only alternative. If our community isn't organized it can't learn, it can't learn. And we have to work hard and get people to come to our organization. If it's not this one then another, because we aren't the only ones, we're not enough on our own. They can go to other organizations, get involved, fight for your rights, unite as a community so that we can truly effect change.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you so much for sharing!

Group: Can we do it? YES WE CAN!