

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of an interview with Jose Lopez by Cynthia Tobar on August 26, 2014 in New York City. This interview is part of "Cities for People, Not for Profit": Gentrification and Housing Activism in Bushwick. Jose Lopez 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.

Jose Lopez

[Start of recorded material at 00:00:00]

Cynthia: Mr. Lopez, can you tell me how long you've been a Bushwick resident?

Jose: Yes. So, family was living in Bushwick for a while, then went to New Jersey to have me back in '86, spent two years there, and then came back to Bushwick at the age of two. So I've been in Bushwick since '88.

Cynthia: So since '88, since you've been an observer of life in the neighborhood, can you describe to me what your living conditions were like, and what you saw, changes you've seen, as a witness in the neighborhood from then until now?

Jose: Yes. Just there in terms of my time here organizationally, I've been rocking with this organization since '99; so I've been here as a leader and as a staff person for 15 years; and late '80s, early '90s, up until 2000, I've seen some shifts. Obviously, in the '70s, '80s, there were the fires; crack hit the streets of New York City pretty hard, and Bushwick was one of those areas that was devastated by the crack epidemic, leading up into the '90, you know, where things and groups like El Puente and others were starting to put their boots on the ground with local churches to try and figure out ways where local community residents, folks from Bushwick, can help to transform the neighborhood into a community that would better serve their needs. So we started to see some of that transition in the '90s, lots of folks from Bushwick doing anything and everything they could to rebuild the community; rebuild their community at a time when, in the '90s, Bushwick, in terms of New York City and New York City politics, was completely ignored by our city and state; in terms of access to resources, in terms of youth programming, in terms of quality schools, all stuff that didn't necessarily exist here for a long, long time.

Then, obviously, leading into the early 2000s, we saw some transition. I would say the thing that I remember being the indicator for me as far back as I can remember, in terms of complete transformation, was a 2005 article in the New York Times, which was asking folks if they'd ever heard about Bushwick. So the title of the article was, "Have You Heard about Bushwick," and it was really a marketing pitch to folks from across the city, across the state, outside of the state, to come into this neighborhood; which was, again, for years and years, completely ignored; and marketing it to folks as the next up and coming hot spot. So at least in my remembrance, going back to 2005, I feel like that was the time when I became really concerned about the direction that Bushwick was moving in.

Cynthia: And, taking a step back, what were the kind of politics that your family was involved in? Or were you the only one involved? Was there any sort of activity growing up that you witnessed that influenced you?

Jose: Yes. I would say I was probably 14 when I got started with the organization, and it was a team of us, about six young people. We were all high school students, just starting high school. There was a moment in '99. Our very first campaign was called the Wise Up Campaign, and it was a campaign to address the lack of youth services in Bushwick, New York. So we were doing the usual: organizing, building a movement of student in New York City, and meeting with our local electives, meeting with the mayor at the time who was Giuliani, and really figuring out what city dollars could be funneled out of other areas didn't necessarily support the growth of a young person, so that we would be able to do something like build a community space, a community center; something for young people to be involved, but also a place that young people could help shape.

So it wasn't, for us, just about funding some program. It was about funding some program, some center, that young people could be a part of creating. The fight at the time was the same fight that we see year after year ever since, right? The city says there's absolutely no funding in communities like Bushwick to be able to build these kinds of programs and services. So that was a fight for about a year and a half, and then I would say in the middle of 2000, when we were fighting for community funding, and we were fighting for local high schools, we had seen that while Giuliani was transitioning out, into the Bloomberg era, there was \$64.6 million earmarked in capital funding to be able to expand Crossroads Youth Detention Center and Horizons Youth Detention Center, which were two youth jails in East New York and Mott Haven in the Bronx, that were only at that time between 60 and 70 percent capacity. So they weren't even filled at the same time that the city was telling us there's no funds, but they wanted to build more jail beds for young people like me. So we engaged in that fight and eventually won that fight and got \$53 million taken out of that pot and reinvested in youth education.

It's those kinds of battles that I feel like folks in Bushwick have been fighting for a long, long time; things that we know address the real needs of the African and Latino population of Bushwick, and of low-income communities across New York; not just Bushwick, but areas like Brownsville, East New York, Bed Stuy, Jackson Heights, Flushing; communities of color where folks are working class. We were just calling on things that we knew could help, and those things, in '99, were vastly ignored; and long before my time organizing and growing up, we know they were vastly ignored in Bushwick as well.

Cynthia: Well, given Bushwick's history of being a neighborhood that's going through, currently, in regards to – back to the housing issues that are really prevalent, I've been documenting the perspectives of not just newer Bushwick residents,

such as the artists that are moving into the area, but also getting the longer term residents, the people from the community who've been battling these issues that you were talking about in regard to housing; what we've seen happen in Williamsburg with that gentrification. How do we figure out who's entitled to what with these trends toward displacement of long-term residents in exchange for having newer residents be attracted to an area? What are your thoughts on those issues, on those debates; and how do you see organizations such as Make the Road New York provide positive working examples that don't necessarily have to focus so much on displacement but reinvestment in the community?

Jose:

For us, organizationally, our stance is politics and policy. We live in a capitalist country; so the idea, not just in Bushwick but across the country, is that we're going to put profit over people. That is the idea of most homeowners across New York. It's definitely the idea of the real estate board of New York, the most powerful players in the housing game right now in New York City, if not the most powerful player, in regard to housing policy and politics in New York. I think it's important to understand this free market system where folks can capitalize and take advantage of others, given current conditions. So I think for us, in Bushwick there was this tension in the early 2000s. Where do we turn [unintelligible 00:08:22], right? It's the fight against folks who don't look like us, white artists moving in who are taking over the apartments that we built with our own sweat and are paying a little bit more to be able to have access to a more affordable rent than maybe they could have paid in Williamsburg or the lower east side, midtown, other places that have also been gentrified; or is that a losing fight? Is it a losing fight to go after folks who are the new renters, and do we go after winning on substantive policy change to prevent displacement in the first place? So it took a little while for the neighborhood to have that conversation and figure out that that's really where we need to transform our energy.

So I can argue with my neighbor who's white all day long about he or she decided to take the apartment, given the history of that apartment, given the fact that maybe Juana and her three kids have been living there for 15 years, and it was the only placed in Bushwick they could afford; but that doesn't change the situation in that moment. We can still have that conversation in a way that builds, so that we can figure out how to keep whatever's left of the affordable Bushwick affordable; but I think ultimately, the energy of New York City has to be geared into changing policies both at the city and state levels; again, to prevent displacement in the first place. When you look at housing codes, when you look at city code, when you look at state code, every single housing law that exists in this city and state, and in most cities and states across the country, every single code is designed to be pro landlord, pro building owner; not pro tenant.

So, just to keep it short, until we transform that, until we figure out how to protect families – especially families who are working class – those families are going to get the shit end of the stick; not just in Bushwick, but in New

York City. Costs are rising in every borough. Obviously they're rising in Brooklyn faster than anywhere else. But New York City as a whole isn't an affordable place to live.

Cynthia: And when we talk about the issues facing local community residents, we can still continue to battle – especially the emphasis that you're talking about with black, Hispanic, and Latino youth, do you see any parallels with the younger artistic community that's moving into the area; how there could be room for collaboration with those populations? Has there been any dialog or attempt to [unintelligible 00:11:23]?

Jose: I've definitely had dialog. Organizationally we have 14,500 members, all of whom are Latino immigrants, most of whom are monolingual Spanish speakers. So in terms of community coordination with new folks who mostly don't speak Spanish, it's a hard field to navigate, for a number of reasons. A, we're still not past that point where folks aren't still upset about the fact that new community members are moving in. B, there's the language barrier. But also, I feel like we've done a pretty good job keeping our focus on policy; that that's where people want to keep their focus in terms of our organization and our members. Dialog is welcome. We want to have open dialog.

But we also want to make sure that folks coming into the neighborhood respect the fact that some of us here who have been living here all our lives know the game and have been doing this for a long time. So there are just some things that have been happening, trying to reinvent the wheel, or using language that is less inclusive of everyone. It's those kinds of things that we want to stay away from, I think. I've seen some mission statements from local artists in Bushwick who are talking about being the innovators of art in Bushwick, as if art never existed in this neighborhood before the existence of white people; and particularly in Bushwick, Brooklyn. So seeing some of that kind of stuff, I think until we're able to address some of those little things, I feel like it will continue to be a challenge.

But again, the real problem is how fast the cost of living in New York City is rising; and the reality is that it's a problem for me, and it's a problem for our members here; but it's also a problem for the new folks moving into Bushwick. It's not a problem that only goes after black and brown folk, although as the poorest New Yorkers, they feel the biggest burden right now. But it's a problem that is going after everyone, if they happen to be on the lower end of the income brackets in New York City. So when you look at how we're determining affordability, for example, in New York, a family of four, based on the area median income, is listed at \$89,000. I don't know many folks, artists or non-artists, black or white or brown, who are making \$89,000 a year for their families. So I think it's a universal issue. We've just got to figure out how to get past some of those barriers to address it together.

Cynthia: What would be some ideas that you would have about bridging that divide across groups? It'd not just be finding ways of linking these culturally diverse

populations, both the newer residents and the older residents, so that it doesn't become an issue of us versus them; but changing the definition of what this community is becoming. What are your thoughts on that?

Jose: I'm an organizer. So I would tell folks – and I have told folks – on the other side, organize. It's what you should do, and I think the only thing we could do to be able to keep New York City affordable for most people. So it could be in collaboration with Make the Road New York, or the El Puentes of Bushwick. It could be you doing your own thing. As long as, I think, we come to an understanding; not just Bushwick, but, I think, across the city. There are so many folks doing housing work. We have to be able to, as a city, especially in a community, identify what are nonnegotiables for our people. What are the things we absolutely want to happen in 2014? What are the two or three things we absolutely want and need to happen in 2015? I think if we can, as a housing movement in New York, we can figure out what those things are, so that while we're pushing from different pockets in New York City, we're still pushing the same key issues that impact all people, I think we'll be able to slow down this beast of gentrification that folks are seeing across New York City. So that would be my response. Organizing doesn't necessarily mean getting 60 people in a room to strategize around politics. There are different avenues to do this work. This avenue that you're taking of documenting stories and producing videos is one of those avenues. So I just feel like folks should figure out how to plug in. Folks should figure out, what are the things they most care about, and whether or not people in their neighborhood care about those same things; and then folks should just talk to each other, just to make sure that we strategize and that we're moving at the same time towards a common goal.

Cynthia: What would you think are the biggest challenges to bridging those divides, and what are some examples of things that have already been attempted in terms of bridge that divide in recent months or the last year, reaching out to other populations who have similar concerns here in Bushwick?

Jose: So I think in terms of recent fights, we saw some stuff go down in Queens around Flushing Meadows-Corona Park. We saw some stuff go down in Bushwick around rezoning Bushwick and Flushing Avenue, the Rheingold rezoning. So I feel like ...

Cynthia: Can you talk a little bit about that in detail, or just a synopsis of what that was, for folks who aren't aware of the Rheingold rezoning?

Jose: So let me just talk about rezoning in general, just because Rheingold was one example. What we're seeing under the current administration, and we also saw under the Bloomberg administration is, in New York City we can't build out. There's no land. If we build out, we can't build on water. Because you can't build out, you have to build up. We're at about eight and a half million people in this city. We'll get to nine million by 2030. So there's this question of, how do you accommodate that number of people in a city that has such

sparse land. So building up is the way to do that. Right now, there are already laws that exist in regards to air rights and how far up developers can build. So what is happening, what started under the Bloomberg administration, and what's continuing to happen under the de Blasio administration, is, folks are creating housing plans, housing market plans, to be able to build massive amounts of housing in New York; to be able to accommodate the growing population that we have in this city.

To do that, they've had to – and they will continue to – rezone particular pockets of New York City. They will choose communities like Bushwick, for example, Flushing, and Bushwick Avenue, and they will rezone pieces of land in that particular area to give developers the right to build very high. In some cases we've seen 20, 30 stories. In some cases we've seen much higher than that. I think downtown Brooklyn is the community we would look at to see buildings that are as high as 40, 50, 60 stories. So that is what's been happening. Between 2005 and 2011, the Bloomberg housing plan was that we were going to build 150 or so thousand units. So he built 100,000 of those units between '05 and 2011 in a hundred different rezoning processes. There were a hundred different rezoning fights. What we saw is that local communities weren't ready to engage in those fights, weren't ready to negotiate community benefits agreements that entitled those communities to the jobs, to the apartments at affordable rates, et cetera. So we saw that, out of 100,000 units built in those six years, only 1900 were actually affordable; which is less than two percent.

So that was a huge lesson learned for New York City, for communities; to be able to say, man, they're building all this shit, but who are they building it for? They're definitely not building it for folks who are earning at minimum wage, for folks who are earning \$30,000, \$40,000, or \$50,000. It's not for those folks. So who are they building for? So right now, the current mayor has a housing plan, again, to preserve and/or create 200,000 units. So the current mayor is going to be rezoning, very similarly to the way that that happened under Bloomberg; but because of the lesson learned, it's a time for us to engage in that fight in a different way. So we know that rezonings are happening. They've already started.

So the question is, who do we make sure that local communities are equipped with the tools on the ground to be able to stop big-time developers from developing shit in the neighborhoods that doesn't reflect the needs of the people who are already there. The current fight that you look at right now is Astoria code, because the community board and the borough president shot it down. They said, you want to build this massive shit on the waterfront. None of it's affordable. You're trying to get away with just 20 percent affordability, even at higher rates of rents. You're not going to build that here. So that's one place where we're keeping our eye and trying to do some work; but I just feel like that's what happened at Rheingold. That's what's happening on [Woodward] now. That's what's going to continue to happen over and over in New York in all five boroughs, and I just feel like we have to be sure;

especially the hotbeds of development, which are going to be Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, some of the outer boroughs, because a lot has already gone down in Manhattan. We have to make sure that folks are ready to engage in those fights.

So in terms of how to build, new and old, that's the way to build; because those brand new luxury condos being built are not for the people who are members here. They're also not necessarily being built for the local artists that have been coming into Bushwick. I can't afford that shit, and neither can the local artists living up the block. So I think the easy way to engage: Understanding that there's all this development. All the development that's going to happen isn't for folks on lower income brackets, and we need to address that.

Cynthia: What can people do now, people who want to be engaged? What would you recommend as the first step? Even if you're a long-term resident that hasn't been involved with Make the Road or El Puente, or newer residents who are struggling but also are socially aware and want to take part and want to contribute and want to give back to the community? What would you suggest that they can do now?

Jose: So [unintelligible 00:22:48], right? Initially what I think people will need to do is reflect on their own values. We know we need to build housing. The question that we should be asking ourselves is, who do we think that housing should be built for? Obviously if you think that housing should be built for the top one percent of earners in New York, I have no interest in building with you. You don't represent me. You don't represent my family, and you don't represent my people in Bushwick. So if that's who you are, if you're a top earner, and that's your interest; fancy, luxury condos for the highest earners in New York; then I'm not interested in having this conversation with you. If you're somebody who feels like we need to grow the housing stock in New York for the lowest income earners and also middle income earners, then I feel like that should be the first thing you're asking yourself. There's going to be construction. There's going to be all this new housing. The question first is, who do you think that housing should be built for? After that, I feel like it's up to you to plug in and figure out what's happening in your local neighborhood. There are groups across the city. In Bushwick, again, there's El Puente. There's Los Sures. There's St. Nick's. There's Make the Road. There's local churches. [Unintelligible 00:24:08] an organization inside of St. Barbara's. So I feel like plugging in with local groups, doing that study of, who are the players on the ground who have been doing this for a little while; and also plugging into key events. Reynoso, who is the local council member, just had, last week, the first community rezoning workshop; so that folks from the neighborhood get to understand a little bit better what rezoning means and how it will play out in this particular district. Then at that point, it's really figuring out how to engage. Who are the people I should be talking to to figure out where development will begin; and once those applications are put in for open land to rezone, to build up. Then I think it's up to us to be at the

table to make sure that the community board, the borough president, and the council member don't bite on a deal that's not good for Bushwick. So we've seen that over and over and over again. As an organization we're part of a coalition called The Real Affordability for All Coalition. What we believe is very simple. Developers who want tax breaks, incentives, and who want to build huge luxury housing, the motto up until this point has been 80 percent market, 20 percent affordable. We think that's bullshit. We think that that has gone out with the Bloomberg administration. We know that the current administration has been talking about 70/30 to do some more. We still think that's bullshit.

Cynthia: And you believe in the 50/50 model.

Jose: We think that 50/50 is fair. The lowest income earners make up the largest body of residents in New York. Service jobs like the fast food industry, where folks are only making \$8 an hour, are the fastest growing jobs in New York now. So if we're growing our job market but only paying people the minimum wage, we're also growing the housing stock, but making it not affordable to the same people, then we have a problem. So we think, cool; you want to rent 50 percent or sell 50 percent of the stock as high as you can get, fine; do that. But 50 percent should be truly affordable, starting at the lowest income earner, which are the minimum wage earners; who, on an annual level, are making about \$16,000 a year. So let's start the conversation there. Let's cover those folks who are still working full-time jobs, just happen to pay low wages, and then let's start the conversation from that point.

Cynthia: Thank you so much for your time. Do you have any closing remarks before we wrap up?

Jose: I don't know. Not really, unless you have more questions.

Cynthia: Yes, no worries. Any closing remarks about Make the Road New York, or any message you want to give out to people before I wrap up?

Jose: No. I'd just tell folks, we're on 301 Grove. Folks know my name. Check out our website: [maketheroadny.org](http://maketheroadny.org). If folks are interested in building and learning about the housing work we're doing here, any of the citywide or statewide coalitions that we're a part of, 2015 is really going to be the year where we have to transform housing policy; especially at the state level. So if folks are interested and want to learn more, want to get down, just check us out, hit us up, and we can build.

Cynthia: Thank you so much.

Jose: Cool.

[End of recorded material at 00:27:50]