

WHAT ENDURES

JAY SANCHEZ ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

**Let me start by asking you your name, where you're from, and where you live now.**

My name is Jay, well actually it's Juan Sanchez, but I'm known as Jay Sanchez all my life. Actually Jay Dukes is my nickname. But I'm from, originally, born and raised in New York by Puerto Rican parents.

**And where specifically in New York?**

Well, um, right here in Williamsburg. Southside, South 4th. I lived down on 155 South 4th Street until the age of 19, then I got married.

**Married at 19!? Good for you!**

Yes, I did. And actually um I'm going to be celebrating forty years married on November 20th.

**So where'd you go to...you grew up how far, how close to here?**

To here? The next block over! This is 145, I lived on 155 South 4th Street. That's why I was gonna circle you around so you could see everything.

**Oh! Yeah! We should. We can walk. So did you live in the same house the whole childhood?**

Well I lived there...most of my childhood was there from the age of 7 years—well actually 7 and a half—cause I left um Muzzuro—which is another part of Williamsburg off of Union Avenue, Union Strip. I lived over there till I was 7 and a half and I moved out this way, but I also lived on South 4th in '71 when I was about 4 years old so I mainly stayed here because my aunt lived over here and on South 4th Street. And my mom, we still have the apartment as a matter of fact, and my baby brother, who is 37 years old, he's one year older than my son, stayed with the apartment, but my mom lived there 40 years, 50 years. Actually 50 years! Wait let me think about it. 50 years. Yeah so you know it's sorta like my brother inherited the apartment. You know because of the rents and everything that has changed here.

**Did you guys know everybody in the neighborhood?**

We knew everybody in the neighborhood and everybody knew us.

**Probably still do!**

Yeah, yeah! I walk around, you know, through different areas and I bump into a lot a lot of people but I don't hardly come out here as much as, you know. But we can walk around and you can see—

**Yeah, yeah! I wanna see where you grew up!**

**How many siblings did you have?**

All of us were 7.

This over here was an abandoned building it was like a Jewish, I don't know... we used to call it the haunted house. And we used to come and play there. And it was abandoned. And then they built something else before this, they had, it was like a facility for people with special needs and then it became this. I don't know what it is now.

**It's uh senior housing, I think.**

Oh it's senior housing now? Okay. This is where, we saw this being built here. I used to go to this junior high school. Junior High School 50. And Driggs on South 3rd. I went there for three years.

**Did you like it?**

Uh! Those were some of my best years. That's where I met my wife.

**That's nice! And did she grow up in the neighborhood too?**

Yeah! My wife actually grew up—but on the other side—see the division from this side and that side is the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. You see the overpass? So we would call that the other side. So she lived on the other side and we lived on this side.

**And was that like another world?**

Well not not, no. It was more like a boundary of territories back then. So...that grocery store's been there forever.

**That same one?**

Well on the corner... Hey Brother! Como estas? ... Well there's always been a grocery store there. Always. This building over here's pretty famous. This one right here, 778. I don't know if you've ever heard of *Serpico*, the cop, they made a movie with Al Pacino. Al Pacino *Serpico*. This is where he got shot.

Then uh there was a kid who lived in that corner building who got shot over here in front of this building too by the store that was on *this* corner...and the storeowner. And there was a kid that fell from the last floor and landed on top of the garbage cans. From the last floor trying to climb in from the fire escape into his window because his mom wouldn't give him the keys.

**On which floor? The top one?**

The very top one. He landed on garbage cans.

**How many floors is that?**

Six or Seven. Yeah.

**And he lived!**

No! He *died*! Crumpled, yeah!

So when I first came to South 4th Street I lived in that building right there. That's 171. That building, not the corner, the one with the fire escape. And this is where my mom met my stepfather. My mom was a young widow. And um this is where she met the man that raised us. My father.

**Just on the street corner?**

Heh? No no he had a sister that lived there, he used to live across the street. And they met. We wound up going on a trip and they met and they fell in love and...

This doctor's office here—I don't know if it's still a doctor's office—it was forever a doctor's office. This was the neighborhood doctor. His name was Rabinowitz. So everybody went there. I don't think that's a...you know I don't think he's there any longer.

**Did he live in the neighborhood too?**

He had his office there. I don't know exactly where he lived. This grocery store's been here forever also. It's exchange hands, you know, owners many times.

**So where'd you move after you got married?**

Well I went two buildings over. This is where I used to lived at. Up there on the second floor. So up here on the second floor is where I used to live. This used to be a grocery store. Now you see this...

**...Now that must be new!**

This is, you see this over here, this was an empty lot until just like, you know, maybe three or four years ago. Big empty lot. This is where we used to...

**Your whole childhood it had just been an empty lot?**

My whole childhood. An empty lot. We played baseball in there, we played football there. Um it was a big, big empty lot. And if you come around the corner right it would come all the way to, almost all the way to the other side of the block. All they had there was like a couple of huts and then they had buildings on the other side of the street. They were like warehouses that were actually like abandoned and condemned and we used to also play in there. We used to play, you know our childhood, hid-n-seek games. But this hasn't been around not too long. This has been around five, six years.

**Wow. Yeah, it doesn't look anything like the rest of the neighborhood.**

It's awesome, yeah?

**Do you know anybody that lives in there?**

No I *don't*. My brother still lives over here and my aunt lives on the third floor. My first apartment, when I got married was here. I was up on the fourth floor. And my cousin lived here.

**Where does your cousin live now?**

My cousin actually lives in the projects in you know Troupe Avenue. She's doing well. Then we used to have people who have lived here, you know, all their lives. There's actually a man way into his nineties here that he still lives. With his wife. Before they had all this fencing over here we used to use these walls to play handball. That Chinese handball.

**Are there still kids in the neighborhood like that?**

Ah no, there's no playing out here. On of my girlfriends used to live over here. And then my cousins' parents owned this, it was a restaurant. They actually moved out to California and then they wound up somewhere in Florida. And one of them actually came back, to Williamsburg. That's the Williamsburg Bridge. Right under the bridge there was a place called Sand Park. So from Sand Park we used to go and play.

**Down by the water?**

Well the water's a totally different story. The water, we have so many memories there; It's incredible. If you want I'll take you for a ride and I'll show you around.

Couple of blocks over, right? They had P.S. 37. That was the first school I went to in this neighborhood. But it was one of those like old, old, old schools and they wound up closing it the first year I was there so I ended up going to the one in the Northside. I don't know if you know the neighborhood but you have the Northside up there, and then the Southside. So at North 4th there's P.S. 17. I went there for a year also. That was a good school.

Essie! Essie! What's up! What's up! How ya doin! Giving this guy a tour of the neighborhood. He's one of the original guys that used to live over here, a long time, a long time. Everybody was like family over here. This block was like one of the most united blocks that you had in the neighborhood. This block here.

Yeah so actually, you wanna walk that way then we can walk back? This was a grocery store, always. Over there, the corner lot, you see where the lanterns are? That used to be a pool hall. So we used to play pool. We had another pool hall on South 1st over here, and Bedford.

### **Are there still pool halls around?**

No. The only pool hall I know in Williamsburg is closer to the Bushwick area. Grand Street and Bushwick Avenue. There was a lot of social clubs too. There was a social club over there, one over here. Grand Street was all covered with social clubs. Little clubs that had their own little pool tables. This used to be a club here. I guess they changed it up. I mean we hardly ever walked this here. We took South 3rd. Why? I don't know. We always used to come down, turn on Bedford. I guess it was more to be safer. Back then there was a lot of gangs. I mean we had gangs on this side. We had gangs on that side. And we had gangs on the other side. So, i mean growing up, some got caught up with that activity too, you know?

If you walked this way you could of wound up getting ambushed, so the safer way was South 3rd.

### **Did your mom worry about you going out to play? To walk around?**

Well no. Not when we were going out to play. But then when we got older yeah. Then a lot of things did change.

This over here, you see where all these little houses are here? These were some of the first new houses they constructed here. They were supposed to be like affordable housing. I know people that bought into them. Matter of fact my wife's cousin bought one of them. I don't know if she still has it. This was exactly where the school was at, P.S. 37. Right here.

### **And do you know when they built these? Like around when?**

They built these...maybe about 15 years. They're fairly new. So I wound up buying in Astoria like 20 years ago and I think these came after. I think it was the same program, a subsidized

program. You had to have certain criteria to qualify for the homes. You know as far as subsidy. And it was the same builder, we have the same gates. This is too square for me though.

You see the one with the angels there? One of my best friends—they've been here in the neighborhood forever—his mother owns that house. And it has like a Spanish touch. As you can see they're from Spain. Spanish-Puerto Rican.

**Are most people Spanish or Puerto Rican or Dominican in the neighborhood?**

Well in this neighborhood it was mostly Puerto Rican, Dominicans, and now it's like really really mixed. Now you have white and then you have Latinos. I think it's gotten, like the balance has subsided. As far as the population compared to what it was ten, fifteen, twenty years ago. More and bigger changes.

You know some people who have lived here and owned homes have sold them and made money and left, and then the people who've stayed behind they're hanging onto their apartments until they, you know, die or move away. You have more, you know, hipsters moving in. That's what it is.

**And where's everybody going? Where's everybody that you grew up with going? Where do they all live now?**

We're all scattered. Um, let's walk up that way and then get across South 3rd.

Okay um, all of my friends are scattered. We're still together. We actually have a MC club. We have one in Staten Island. We have a couple still here in the neighborhood. Astoria, New Jersey. We come together. We even had, had a guy out in Vegas, we went out there and he escorted us all through Nevada and Arizona and we rented bikes. We come back.

You see this over here? That used to be an empty lot on the corner most of our life.

**Did you play there too?**

No this is where we played, where we used to come as teenagers and drink beer and smoke.

**There's always one spot.**

This was *our* spot. I mean there were hot summer nights, you'd be up there up on the fire escapes. Just hanging out, drinking. Away from everything.

**And what is that building?**

This used to be Saint Peter and Paul. It's um actually the school part of the Catholic church. The church is back here. Yeah we can probably walk back here.

**And this is all the same, as it was?**

This is all the same, but they're actually going to be refurbishing this. Back here we used to have a carnival every year. This was our hangout. There was a warehouse over here. We used to come here and play handball off the wall and when it rained we'd hangout inside the warehouse.

**What was in the warehouse? It was just abandoned?**

The warehouse? It was abandoned. One of those one and half story ones, no roof. We used to use it for handball and climb up to get the ball all the time. We also used to play handball here at the church. They actually had their last mass two weeks ago.

**Like forever? Or they're just redoing it?**

They'll be knocking this down and building the church inside here and it's supposed to be remodernizing it. So I don't know what they'll be doing here. Over here they used to have a handball court. And a basketball court. And a baseball field. This was our handball court, our baseball court started right here. You know what? I think I have a picture right here. Let me see if I can find it. Of me hanging with the graffiti on the wall. So this is where we had our constructive pastimes. They had karate, boy scouts.

**So did you know people that went to the school?**

Oh yeah I knew everybody. And everybody knew me. I knew everybody there.

**Does your MC club ride out here a lot?**

Yeah. I mean this was our hangout. This is our meeting point. And from here we ride off. Over here, you know, a lot a lot of memories. I have a picture of a couple of girls here, right over there on those steps. Let me see if I can find them.

This picture is over there of my wife. I'll ask if you can put it in the exhibit.

There goes one of the nuns. They used to have back here what they call it, a directory. They used to have a walkway back here. So lets get back and I'll give you a ride around, show you more.

**Did you ever think there'd be buildings like that in the neighborhood?**

Shhh, never in my wildest dreams. Nobody knew. This all started happening. It's something that creeped up. I mean we had no way of knowing.

**What were the first signs of it?**

Well the first signs of what?

**Of the neighborhood changing, the way it did.**

Well, the first signs of the neighborhood changing. Wow.

**Like, I don't know. The first buildings like that one to go up or maybe businesses that changed. Or maybe just when did the rent get expensive?**

All of this just blew up, you know, like it hasn't been 10 years. We always had people coming in and living. It's the cheap rent that attracted everybody over here. We're gonna walk down that way. But the thing about it was we always saw them growing up, I say them meaning what turned out to be hipsters, of course, we had a few artists that would come around, a few photographers that would walk around. There's actually documentaries from the '80s that are out about that. But people were documenting. They had their little art galleries, little studios. But all that was new that was being built up was that school really on the corner, P.S. 84. That was really it. And the building down South 2nd. They were being renovated. A couple of new ones came up, but that was affordable housing for the people in neighborhood, the people that were raised and lived here, born and raised here.

**Do you think that people wish that they could come back? Like do you think everybody wished they could lived in the neighborhood again? Or, like, does it feel natural that everybody just kinda scattered?**

I guess it's just kinda natural. You grow up and then move away, you know? But the thing about it is is that everywhere you turn, there's change. You have friends, for instance me, I had a friend there, we went to junior high school then went to Aviation High School together. And right there. As a matter of fact I was seeing photos of people who lived here, and he's out in Florida. I saw pictures of him just a little while ago. And um, you know, everybody that lived here, of the kids growing up anyway, everybody's moved away. There's very very few that stayed. You know I have to say the one's that stayed, you know, the one's that stayed stayed mostly because they couldn't afford to go anywhere else so they had to do wit what they had. Then the others too, you know the ones with the drug problems, they stayed. But thank God we were able to get away, you know. We loved the neighborhood. I have friends over here. One of my guys lived here. He passed away in 2011 after we came back from Vegas.

**So you don't feel like people, you know, wanted to stay in the neighborhood?**

You see over there by the liquor store? There used to be another pool hall here.



Well as far as, you know, me growing up, when we were growing up, the best thing was to leave. Because of what was happening in the neighborhood with the gangs, the gang activity. You know and especially you had kids, and then you didn't want your kids to be growing up in a ghetto, you know? So I was one of the first ones to leave.

**How old were you?**

I was 19. Got married. I got my first apartment on 4th Street but then I had to move.

**Why'd you have to move?**

Because of the gangs. Yeah.

**And were you happy after you moved? Or was it hard? I bet it was hard after living here your whole life.**

Well we were coming back, you know? Hanging out here, living out there. And then I was out in New York where it was worse than this. And I needed up going out to Astoria where I've been for 37 years. I had an apartment I rented, 17 years. Then I had, I got my house 20 years ago. It's funny cause the rents over here, my first apartment was 100 bucks. And I was actually paying pretty high rent for that time. When I went to East New York I was actually paying \$125 a month. When I went out to Queens people were saying "oh Jay's moving to Queens, you know?" No. I was paying \$165. For my apartment. \$165. Now you can't rent an apartment here for less than a few thousand dollars.

My aunt has been over there for longer than my mom. Over there for more than 55 years, 60 years.

We used to hang out on this corner, that one too. Used to know all the people in those houses, but don't know anyone anymore. I knew people in this building over here and this building over here. I have pictures of the people from here. We're connected through Facebook. But now everybody's gone.

**Do you feel like the street life's changed? Like the vibe on the street?**

Oh hell yeah!

**How so?**

Well, let me tell ya something, when we were growing up, until maybe five years ago, five might be too much. When you come from the North Side, from Mccarren Park, there's a light on every single corner. That was never like that. There was only one light. And that was by the school.

**So why do you think they put them in? For like safety or what? More traffic maybe?**

I tell you probably because of got the people like this, people walking into traffic. You know. And the bikers. And there is a lot more traffic. The traffic here has gotten crazy. You never say bike racks. I'm not talking about the Citi Bikes. I'm talking about the parking where you park bikes everywhere, you know? What the hell happened here? That photo that I show you of my wife was up against that wall there. Yeah.

**Is that graffiti still the same?**

No, it's not the same. It's probably for somebody that got killed there. By behind it, where it says "In," that's where she took it. Junior High School 50. Well they tell me it's not called that no more. This was John D. Wells Junior High School 50. I don't know what its called now. Have you ever heard of Alan Hale? He's a comedian actor. He went there.

**Did you know him growing up?**

No, no he was older than us. Just someone who graduated from here; He was an alumni. But up here we had Barry Manilow. He lived up here on the corner. On South 4th Street and Driggs, across the street from us. He lived there before he became famous. Yeah cause you know this was Jewish and Puerto Rican. You had a lot of Jews in this area when we first came here but then they drifted that way. Yep.

**And what? They drifted that way and**

Well you know everybody got housing, got projects, except for us.

**What! Why didn't you get housing too?**

Well you know you find a comfort zone. My mom, my mom she died here. She was on hospice, hospice at home. And she wouldn't leave this for anything. This was her life. My aunt is the same. She's there, she said "Oh I'm gonna die here." I say ok. Me? I picked up at 19, I left and I never turned back. Thank God.

**What does your aunt think about the neighborhood? How it's changed? Is she happy about it or sad?**

Well a lot of people have gone and she's lost a lot of friends.

...

Everything has popped up, businesses, lounges, cafes. It became like, you ever been to San Fransisco? The Haight. Like that.

...

I stopped over here a couple weeks ago and I couldn't believe it. Four thousand, five thousand. Thirty eight. You know it's crazy. Back then you were paying \$200 and it was too much.

...

You feel bad for the people that can't move in here. There was a time when you had people coming in here from Puerto Rican, the Dominican Republic, even Mexico. But now they can't in here and expect to live in an apartment here because they won't be able to afford it. You know there was a time when people said "Oh we want to leave Puerto Rico, find a better life in New York." You can't find a better life here no more. Unless you have a profession.

...

This was all sort of desolate. The only live avenues were Bedford Avenue and Driggs Avenue.