

Alison: Let's just start from the very beginning. Where were you born?

Melvin: I was born in the Dominican Republic. Um I came to the United States when I was ten years old. That was in 1969.

Alison: Okay so you came to Los Sures?

Melvin: I came directly to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in the south side of Brooklyn.

Alison: And what was it like growing up here as a kid? Did you feel a sense of community? Was it fun?

Melvin: Well growing up in Williamsburg was amazing. I mean I thought it was fantastic coming to a place where it snowed. In the Dominican Republic it didn't snow. So it was very odd to see snow and it seemed like uhhh a place of possibilities, but I didn't have any friends and I couldn't speak English very well so it me awhile, approximately two years to get a gist of what it felt like. The American way, the way Americans did things was a little different yeah.

Alison: Did you feel a push and pull between your Dominican identity and your new American identity?

Melvin: Well the identity issues came in later when uhhh when I turned probably fifteen sixteen. Uhh where I missed the Dominican Republic very much and at the same time I started to gain the possibilities of the things you could do in the United States. So there were two worlds then, yeah.

Alison: Yeah interesting. Do you have children?

Melvin: No. No I don't.

Alison: How do you think, if a child came to Williamsburg from the Dominican Republic now, how would their life would be different than yours was when you came in 1969?

Melvin: Well the difference uhh between uhh kids that came in the eighties and for me early seventies uhh is that uhh kids could speak Spanish here and it is okay. They could do it slower. I had to learn how to speak English immediately and there were a lot of cultural ways of being that I couldn't understand. And because of television, those kids that came in the eighties, they knew those things in the Dominican Republic. They understood what it was to be a Dominican in New York because they saw movies about it, they saw interviews about it, so they were aware of what to expect. I didn't have any of that when I came into Williamsburg.

Alison: And people who move in now, do you think they also have a very different idea of -

Melvin: -Well they have it easier in a way, because when you move here now, you have the possibility of uhh of having an infrastructure. If you want to do English classes you can. If you want to go to school uhh there's a system already in place right now in

schools. When I came it was the beginning uhhh umm what do you call it? They were just beginning to give the first classes on -

Alison: - ESL?

Melvin: ESL! That was just the year, I think, when it began. So it was really really hard for teachers to try and help you along because they couldn't speak Spanish themselves, but now you go to a class and a lot of the professors know how to speak Spanish themselves yeah.

Alison: So I would say that's a result of the world becoming more globalized, people are **putting** effort into making the school systems better, but it is also definitely a part of the neighborhood changing.

Melvin: Totally!

Alison: Yeah. So is there a specific turning point that you can remember and articulate where it was like, "Oh that's the moment when things really started -"

Melvin: - Well I think the early eighties. Uhh 1983/84/85 I think is the turning point. You could see it in the neighborhood. Not only were artists just starting to move into the neighborhood uhhh white artists were just starting to move into the neighborhood, but also you saw the community uhh now you had kids who had been educated here that had come from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and other places and they had jobs. So the community was shifting. People were buying their own homes. They had cash to buy their own home. Even though banks weren't lending to them, uhh community people went to borrow from whoever could lend them the money to buy a home. So it was a big shift I would say in the mid-eighties yeah.

Alison: Yeah and as a young person did you recognize the shift? Or only reflecting on it now do you realize what was going on?

Melvin: No I didn't. As young person you life is uhhh about your friends, your neighborhood, dancing, we danced a lot in those days it was such a big deal to just go to Coney Island. That was like, "Oh my god we went to Coney Island!" It was such a big deal. It was a thrill. But no, I don't think I noticed the push as it was coming in. My older brother did. He was an architect and he was the one who started warning people in the neighborhood that they should buy their own apartments early on. Many didn't and now they regret it.

Alison: So they didn't buy up their apartments and subsequently the rent goes up and you're forced to relocate.

Melvin: Yeah.

Alison: So as you have all these artistic types moving in, did you notice a shift in the demographics of the neighborhood? The businesses that were in the neighborhood?

Melvin: Sure. Sure. Actually in the early eighties there was no shift when it came to business. Not in the South Side at all. It was mainly here in the North Side of

Williamsburg that you saw a shift actually. They were the *L Café* and uhh and *Kasha's* and uhh a Polish restaurants. So there was very little. Then came *Oznot's* on Berry and North 9th Street. That made a change because that was a real hangout for artists. Not only to just have coffee, but also to have dinner so uhh that uhh we could feel the change then. But that was in 94. Yeah.

Alison: And was there ever a moment where you thought to yourself, Oh the neighborhood is gonna totally change? Or did you think it was gonna stay the same? And this kind of balance would be maintained?

Melvin: No it was changing because we were changing. Uhhh we were getting older. We had jobs. We wanted to do things. So people started to move out of the neighborhood naturally. Not because of being displaced by gentrification. Umm so when you look at it from the inside we didn't miss umm it wasn't that noticeable. There were a few white artists that came into the area, and I actually married one of them, and so that wasn't such a problem. Uhh the noticeable bunch came in the nineties, 94/95. That is when we realized, "Oh my god. This is an issue." And and but yet those who came in the eighties, late eighties, were very cool. Became friends with community people uhh were interested in the community. The ones that came after, I would say 98, closer to 2000, that group didn't...they had different agendas. They wanted to meet their friends. They wanted to meet people they knew and that changed the dynamic of older people in the community. Even people here in the North Side uhh Polish and uhh Italian people, which I knew very well. My father had the first dry cleaners called, 'Brothers Cleaners' on Driggs and North 7th Street and that was in 1973. So I knew the Polish. I knew many of the Italians in the area and they complained that a lot of the people coming in in the year 98 to 2000 something, were not as friendly, were not as interested in them. Uhhh in sharing the community with them. Yeah.

Alison: So when that shift happened, in the late 80s and early 2000s, sorry late 90s early 2000s, were there steps taken by the community to try and assert themselves and say, "This is our community we have been here for decades. You can't come in and push us out"?

Melvin: I think the community always wanted to share the community because we all wanted the benefits that come with some gentrification. Uhh regeneration. Umm in the community...in the community, we wanted some of the benefits that come with gentrification or regeneration. Where people come in and uhh bring in new businesses, uhh bring in uhh new possibilities of things that you can do in the community, plus safety. Because there are many more people in the area and many more people that are middle class and upper middle class uhh the police department somehow finds interest in being more protective of the community. So those are the benefits. The conflict came when the community feels that they are being displaced and the rents just go up. So there's no trade. Nobody minds a trade. The problem is when everything becomes one sided. Even in the news when people report on Williamsburg, they forget to report that there is a vibrant Puerto Rican community. That there are still Polish people here in the neighborhood. That it is a vibrant Polish community. So when they write about it they'll say something like uhh "the hipster neighborhood," but it is not just a hipster neighborhood. That doesn't mean to negate them and the benefits that have come because

of them, but it is the sharing of the neighborhood and that's what is missed by the community at that time and still now.

Alison: So you talk about the benefits that come along with gentrification: it's safer streets, better schools, you mentioned ESL earlier, and that is probably a product of more money flowing into the school-

Melvin: -No actually that came because the Puerto Ricans, and this I have to thank the Puerto Rican people, because Puerto Ricans took a lot of the brunt that Dominicans and Ecuadorians and other groups that moved to the area, Mexicans, they took on the uh political system. They took on the educational system and it was Puerto Ricans who really went to bat uh for making reforms in education. So I have to give it to the Puerto Ricans. They they they took all the brunt. Everybody else that came after, they found things in place, infrastructure in place yeah.

Alison: Interesting. Um so you talk about the benefits of gentrification, but there are also a lot of negatives. Do you think there is a way to balance the two? Cause it just seems-

Melvin: -Well yeah. The way to balance uh gentrification for both the the people uh the new people and the old people in the community is that uh people in the community have to be able to buy property. The more properties bought by locals, uh makes it much more even. That way you keep the culture, you keep the flavor of the community, and then you infuse it with this new group of people coming in, which is wonderful. It is wonderful to have artists in the community, it is wonderful to have Wall Streeters in the community, it amplifies the potential of a community when you have the mix. The problem is that very few people are interested in the mix. Most people are interested in 'my community' 'their community' and what makes New York as a whole wonderful, for somebody visiting, is the mix. And so for me as a traveler, I've traveled to 62 countries around the world, and when you travel and you visit uh different communities. But you see homogenous communities and you think it's wonderful because its odd and like when I went to Asia the first time, Laos. You see these communities and its wonderful, but when you come back to New York City you find it amazing that New York City can have 130 or 140 countries all squeezed into one space and that that makes it uhh that gives New York City uh tremendous potential. It makes uh living in New York City a special place because you can have so many communities all at once. Yeah. And and yeah when I came back to New York after visiting Poland and I learned the words *gin dobre* to say 'good day/how are you' and then I say it to a neighbor who is Polish and I'll say *gin dobre* and they look around to see if it was ME or if it was somebody else who said that. And I pronounce it correctly and that that just changes the way they look at me. And now they want to then talk to me... a black guy these old ladies probably would not have initiated a conversation with. Now they'll do it because I have been to their country and I understand them. I know what they are all about and that's what makes New York so amazing. So when the balance of a community is thrown off, that's where I see the problems.

Alison: I think it is interesting because everyone who lives in New York talks about how wonderful the diversity is and you get this great melting pot of culture, but at the same time like you said, people come in and do not... outwardly they have an interest in living in a diverse community, but once you get down to the bones of it they just want to live

with other people whether it is the same socio-economic class, race, religion, whatever it is.

Melvin: Which is very normal. If you travel around the world, we interviewed backpackers in our documentary called *Gringo Trails*, by interviewing them we figured that uh they were almost all middle class, most of them hung out with each other traveling around the world, yet they reported or purported to say that they hanged out with the locals. But what they consider the locals were the hamburgers and frankfurter vendors. Which is what you would do here, but they don't...but there they go hang out with somebody with a stall but they don't hang out with a frankfurter vendor here. So here they choose middle class uhh people, but over there in somebody else's country they choose uhh the poor people because they think that is authentic. That's authenticity. Uhh here in New York City most people try to stay within their own groups whether they believe it or not. They may have a couple of friends, but when they spend...if you look at the Facebook photos, who is on it? You will see that it is mainly one group or maybe two. Unless they went to a particular college where they hanged out with a mixed group of friends, but if they went to a college where everyone was white or everyone was black or everybody was Latino, that is pretty much who they keep as friends. So college I think has a lot to do with how gentrification will have an effect on a place and I think if we did more in the colleges to educate students about mixing there then they'll be easier to mix anywhere else.

Alison: Yeah definitely. I think especially in a place like Williamsburg you have, on paper, a very diverse place.

Melvin: Sure.

Alison: But then-

Melvin: People want to be with their friends.

Alison: Exactly! And like even the difference between the North and the South Side. I don't see...every time I go to Los Sures I don't see a lot of white people.

Melvin: No I see a lot of white people, but they hang with themselves. That's that's one of the sad parts is that they could have access to a different person, a different group of people. Not only economically, because there are a lot of Latinos that are middle class, um but you hardly ever see them mix and that's where the issues I have with the whole thing are.

Alison: Why do you think the hesitation to mix is there? Do you think there's gonna be cultural barriers? A lack of interest? No one wants to put in the effort to try and understand another person?

Melvin: Well from what I learned from doing the documentary on travel, it has to do with stories. Stories. How stories were told to them. I don't know if you grew up reading books about traveling around the world, but if you really look and see who wrote those books, mainly written by a white male. Or white female, but rarely. And those books were very very...became famous so that's how we saw people from around the world.

We saw them as...sometimes we see people as background from other countries. From third world countries in particular and we always have the white individual who is traveling through those countries. The same way it is in New York City. If you have haven't read stories written by locals or a movie done by a local person, you wouldn't even know the diversity that exists in New York City. You would only see a white person coming into a neighborhood that is a background again. And that was usually the way that movies were made. Hollywood movies are mainly made with a white lead or shared sometimes by a black person in the film, but if the neighborhood is poor then the class you'll meet are very poor working class people and sometimes not working at all. So it is a real negative for building relationships. If more movies were made with middle class Latinos and middle class blacks or African Americans then you'll see different relations. In my opinion.

Alison: Do you think media would maybe have a strong effect on that?

Melvin: Has. Media has a strong effect. If you look at the news sometimes, take a look at this as an exercise, and I have done this. When they are talking about a new medication that is being put out, if you see the reporting, you will see that every time they mention a negative side effect to that medicine, usually they will have a black person in the shot as b-roll. Or a Latino person. An overweight black person. And I have always wondered why that is. I don't know. Maybe they aren't doing it consciously. I don't know I won't judge that, but I always look at those patterns and media has a tremendous effect and it can play even a better role than it is playing now. Uh by every time they think of when they are going to mention something negative about a community, who is in the b-roll shot? It is critical. Yeah.

Alison: That is very interesting. I'll definitely try that out. So how did you become involved with the community organizing, making movies about these issues and exploring this stuff?

Melvin: Actually through my wife. We did a documentary called uhhh *The Dodgers Symphony Band*. They are 82-year-old guys who live in the...Italian guys and we did a documentary about our neighbors. And one lived next door to us on the left and another lived next door on the right. And they...they were uhh historical figures. They were historical figures they were here when the Brooklyn Dodgers were in Brooklyn and they were noisemakers and became celebrities they loved the Brooklyn Dodgers so much. But when the Brooklyn Dodgers left to uhh Los Angeles they were heartbroken. So they began a second career of making music for any sports event in the city of New York. And umm Giuliani, George Pataki the Governor, they were friends with these guys and they lived next door to us. And very humble people. And we found footage of them from 1939 dressed in drag at one of the ballparks which is mind blowing. So um I have gotten to know the community through that and also through my father who had the first dry cleaners in the area in 1973 so I got to know a lot of the people in the area.

Alison: Is the dry cleaners still there?

Melvin: Uhh yes. We don't own it. Uhh we owned it for about 30 something years. It got passed onto my brother, then onto my sister-in-law, then onto my other sister, and so on.

It went from Roebling and North 7th Street to Roebling and North 5th and now it is at North 5th and the junction between Metropolitan and uhh North 5th. So we have been in the community a long time. Plus also the South Side, where our home used to be, uhh uhhh we were on South 4th Street between Keaping and Rodney for...since I remember.

Alison: And did your parents stay there after all the children left?

Melvin: Uh no. Actually they left back to the Dominican Republic when they retired. They ended up with three dry cleaners and they moved back to the Dominican Republic to give to uhhh they developed a umm a home for children uhh who were abandoned. An orphanage. They had 20 boys and then later they had 30 girls so they were dynamic people. They always wanted to give back and from what they had they went back to the Dominican Republic to give back yeah.

Alison: They are sort of the American dream. Coming to the States, doing well-

Melvin:-They did well but they started well with an idea of what they wanted and that's one of the things. There were a lot of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans who came here with the goal of going back to the Dominican Republic, but never planned to own a home or a plan of having their kids go to college. A plan to prosper, because they were always thinking that they were gonna go back.

Alison: Do you think...was that the feeling of most of the people who came? I'm just here for a short amount of time to make money and then I'm gonna go back?

Melvin: Oh yeah.

Alison: That's interesting. I haven't encountered any...of all the readings we have done in Becky's class that has never mentioned that it is a kind of temporary thing.

Melvin: See this is where the separation of who came early and who came later. That is where that happens. It is a way of thinking that would have to have been in that period of time in order to think that way. Otherwise you wouldn't think. Because most people came here with the goal of staying, but that was after the 80s yeah and 70s. Um for those families that uhh came in the 70s in particular, the goal was to spend 10 years 15 max and then go back to the Dominican Republic or to Puerto Rico or to Ecuador. Cause I knew some Ecuadorian families and some Mexican families, but that was the goal then. Those families that came in 85 and up from the Dominican Republic, their vision was to stay here. They didn't want to be in the Dominican Republic. They didn't see any future in the Dominican Republic. Things were not very good then, but for us who came earlier we thought that, well my parents did, that you come here, you make some money, you go back home, you buy a nice house, you start a business, and that was the goal. There was always this vision of going back. But the situation here was very hard. There were jobs in the 70s, but no jobs in the 80s and that was very difficult for families that came in the 80s. Where they came here and they ended up going on welfare and ended up getting supported by other means. Criminal means many of them. And what I mean many of them, I don't mean tons, I mean just some. Because when you come with the expectation that there is gold on the street...you just bump into it. It was the same early on in the 70s. On you can make money out of anything! And it was true. There were jobs everywhere

for a working class person. Not a middle class person, but a working class person. Uhh but in the 80s those jobs dried up. Things got really really difficult so it put a different pressure on the group that came in next, So their vision of staying in the United States was something I think they desired. My parents always wanted to go back to the Dominican Republic and have their beautiful home by the beach and relax. So all the kids... they could buy property for their kids. That was the dream. Yeah.

Alison: Did any of your siblings go back? OR did most of them stay in New York as well?

Melvin: Most of my siblings all stayed here. In New York, Vegas, which was another opportunity for a lot of Dominicans to go in the 80s late 80s to work in the casinos. And as well Pennsylvania became another place of opportunity because the properties were really cheap uhhh in Redding, Pennsylvania, Allentown, which were all areas that were depressed. Where white people didn't want to stay any longer and Dominicans found it as a place of opportunity.

Alison: So what happened in the 70s that all these jobs that provided sustenance? What happened?

Melvin: It was a different economy. It was an industry economy. The uhhh Domino Sugar Factory was here uhh a lot of factories that made uhh sweaters, coats, batteries, car batteries were made here in Williamsburg. Umm uhh let me see what else was here? I mean apparels was a big deal in Williamsburg. So um it was cheap labor and any immigrant who wanted a job could get a job and that was incredible. Pretty much every relative of mine that came from Dominican Republic, my parents would just go, "Walk down the street here in the North Side on Roebling and look at the factory signs that say 'We're looking for workers. We will train you.'" It was like that. So there were ample jobs for working class folks. Uhh for middle class folks uhh from Dominican Republic I don't think it was the same opportunity yeah.

Alison: So what have you...in terms of community organizing, how would you say it has evolved since the initial flood of people who were not interested in being a part of the community, I think you said in 98? How do you think activism has changed since then?

Melvin: Activism in the 70s was big. Uhh the Young Lords were here on Marcy Avenue and South 2nd and South 1st, which was very positive they advocated for making changes, uhh of having our rights as human beings and as citizens, uhh respected in particular Puerto Ricans, but they also...Los Sures, El Puente, uhh these were communities that decided they needed to make a stand and they needed to make a stand by making properties available to people who couldn't get loans, again, from the banks. Some banks you went and applied, but you were never gonna get it, it was well known. It was called red-lining and that that that really put out a lot of people, but Los Sures and El Puente helped people apply for housing, apply for uhh...understanding the system. I think people were always driven and they were always dynamic, but when you don't know a system and you don't know how the politics of how a system works and I think these places became interpreters. A lot of the churches in the area, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Churches, are critical to the way information was passed on in the

community, without them and some of the politicians, in the beginning I don't think that we would have had the possibility to stay in the community yeah.

Alison: So do you think, in the past, that was one of the biggest issues? Just understanding the system and how to work it?

Melvin: Oh totally. It is like anything. You go into uhh a different state. Let's say you move from a high school to a college that you have never been to, it is a different community. You are learning. You are learning how things work there. Well it is the same thing with this neighborhood. They come from Dominican Republic where things function...where people pay each other off so you know how things function. You come to a place where people pay each other off, but differently. Uhh you have to become part of the environment, you have to become a part of the social clubs, the social groups, and that is how things work then. And today if you want to get anything you not only have to go to the politicians. I would rather go to one of the local um magazines local newspapers. They will tell me how things work.

Alison: So these services are all in place now? People can go to these community centers and say, "I need help applying for a loan," there's an infrastructure. And the movement to start that was in the 70s?

Melvin: In the 70s yes.

Alison: So this has been going on for a very long time-

Melvin: -Very long time and its...it was a real fight for those place. I admire the people from El Puente, Luis Garden, and Francis uhh and I admire the people from the housing of Los Sures for sticking it out, because there were points where I thought THEY were gonna be eliminated. I didn't think they were gonna survive this long and uhh it has been through also the support of a lot of the older politicians who I think are heroes. In my view, I think they are heroes yeah. And I have to give it to the community members who rally, who took over buildings. I don't know if you know the story. On South 4th Street, between Roebling and Driggs...yeah uhh Driggs and Bedford. Uhh one of the buildings there they took over the building. They took the owner hostage.

Alison: Wow.

Melvin: Yeah. Because they had had enough. They wanted the people out so they would shut down the boiler and make it sound like it was broken. They would never fix it and they had had enough and the community members in the building said, "You know what? We gotta do something. So they took the owner hostage.

Alison: When was that?

Melvin: I don't remember the dates, but there is a whole documentary right now being finished on the subject. Yeah, actually Rebecca can find out.

Alison: Oh wow that is awesome! So is there a moment like that for you? When you were just kind of like 'Oh my God!'

Melvin: There were two moments that were defining for me about the community. One in a good way and one in not such a good way. The one in the good way were the Young Lords. Uhh they were protesting uhh they wanted changes made to the community. They wanted better housing for the community and that was in the 70s and it happened on Marcy Avenue and South 1st Street. They were dressed in their gang colors, but also as revolutionaries umm and they were dressed like Che Guevara and some of the Young Lords are people today who are TV reporters and all these kinds of things. Lawyers. But they they understood that something had to be done and by doing that protest I felt that I could do something watching them. And I thought that was amazing. On the negative side, I was in a group, dance crew, we didn't call it that then but we went to a party. And at this party uhh this group called, The Dukes, which were on this side of the BQE on South 3rd Street came to the dance and this gang from the other side uhh pretty much robbed them of all their sweaters. Right below where the party was taking place and that began a shift, because a lot of the young people became gang members that evening. Just that conflict between those two groups turned into people killing each other. And it turned from, what we called having fun and doing social things and dancing and having competitions, turn into gang members. And I had to change because I had to decide if I wanted to be a part of a gang or not and uhh I decided that I didn't want to become a part of that. So that was a big shift for a lot of young folks at that period.

Alison: Can I ask one more question?

Melvin: Yeah.

Alison: So why do you people did turn to being in a gang? Was it-

Melvin: - There are many reasons why young people turn into gangs. One saying is that uhh you needed to defend yourself, which is true. Every time I went from the other side, the South Side to the West Side the division the BQE, you had to pray that you make it to your high school. It was really that dangerous. There must have been 50 gangs in the area, but then there was the added pressure that you were peer pressured. They were your friends so if your friends were doing it, you would do it too. And uhh and then there was also uhh it was also that people uhh if you went to Coney Island and you got beat up in Coney Island, you had someone to defend you. I mean it was like a protection system, but in the end gangs are all about the same thing. Somebody has power over you and they think that by having big numbers they are gonna achieve something. I think it is a silly thing, but it was...it seemed real at the time to us that somehow you needed that. Umm I wasn't convinced and I didn't become a gang member.

Alison: You had a lot of foresight as a young person its interesting.

Melvin: Yeah well first of all I come from a very strong family where it was made clear to me, to us, what our goals should be. And they protected us. They guided how we heard things. They asked us questions uhh, "What did you do today?" Simple things like that. So the influences inside my house were stronger than the influences outside of my house. I believe that now looking back. I think that is something that could be done with any family. The problem is that many of my friends, they didn't have two parents. They had one parent and they were on welfare. So when you have that its not the same

conversation inside your house yeah. So families umm whether straight, gay, or not, you need a family in order to survive a difficult situation yeah.

Alison: I think that is a good note to end on.

Melvin: Cool.