

**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
EAST VILLAGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview
CARLOS GARCIA

By Liza Zapol
New York, NY
May 6, 2015

Oral History Interview with Carlos Garcia, May 6, 2015

Narrator(s)	Chino Garcia
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
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Carlos "Chino" Garcia at the Neighborhood Preservation Center, May 6, 2015.
Photograph by Liza Zapol.

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Carlos Garcia

“...That’s the trick, how as a gang, physically, we would react. Chances are we would react violently, *pero* then we started saying, ‘Wait a minute,’ this is not just people in the street or something. This is a society is attacking us through the Board of Education, housing situation, jobs. A lot of us...became leaders because we said, ‘We’re getting screwed by the society, not just a couple of thugs.’ ...This is a society that is attacking us. So that’s how come we started organizing as an activist movement.”

(Garcia p.10)

“...[We] became friends of Buckminster Fuller...We started talking about alternative technology in 1965. We were talking about green roofs in 1965 and alternative energy... We were talking about housing. We were talking already about sweat equity and all those type of ideas...One time I was talking with some friends, and they were mentioning this guy named Buckminster Fuller. He really was talking about all kinds of ways of doing this with less material because one of the things, you could talk about renovating a building, but it’s going to cost you a fortune, so how you do it [in a way] that it’s cheaper? How you do it [so] it’s economical, and then, could the people that are going to be living in it be part of the construction?...

So we contact Bucky, and we wanted him to come and speak to a whole bunch of young leaders, Third World leaders, about all these alternative possibilities. He was really nice because he came to give a speech. He was in the Christodora House when it was a community center...He came and gave a speech there in the auditorium, and it was really nice. A lot of Black Panthers, a lot of—besides our group—Young Lords and other people came to listen to him. He gave a beautiful speech for almost two hours about the alternatives of doing things with the least material, the least money possible. It was a really good speech.

Then after the speech, we had a luncheon—I mean a dinner—over at the University of the Street. It was a buffet type of dinner, and he talked socially with everybody, person to person, about—People really thought about it, and it was a good thing...

We had a meeting with Bucky every year after that up to the day he died. We used to meet with him and talk about different alternatives and ideas, how to do a project and use less energy and less materials and that kind of stuff. We didn’t have it, so we would like to know how you do it, and he was a master of that kind of stuff. So basically we became good friends, thank god for that.”

(Garcia pp. 17-19)

“The thing is what we felt when we did that is people should hear other people talk about ideas. We might never do it, but at least we could talk about that. I really felt very strongly that that’s how we educate ourselves, by learning from other people, even just a discussion. Even if nothing comes out of it, just a discussion is rich in itself. So it worked out, and we learned.”

(Garcia pp.18-19)

"[T]he gallery, when it wasn't an exhibit, was a community party or meeting for drug abuse programs, recreational for kids because [of how] I mentioned earlier about Buckminster Fuller and those type of techniques—how you take a space and use it for a lot of uses..."

Now [in] that gallery, there was all kinds of community activity—community meetings, conferences, political meeting, you name it ... There were thousands of all kinds of artists—dancers, visual artists, musicians. I mean some of the best used to use it, too, besides the common people. They would present hundreds of—every year—artists that never been seen in the city, or photographers—that kind of stuff.

...In the thirty years that we managed that building, there were thousands of people that benefited from that building. Construction training—In drug abuse alone and alcohol abuse, there was something like fifteen hundred people a week that used to go there for that, for meetings. The group that we started there [for] drug abuse started with around seven people, and by the time we closed down, they had like almost a thousand members... One time in a hotel, there is this woman in Puerto Rico taking some sun, and she comes over and says, "Hey, Chino, what you doing, what you doing here?" I thought, "Hey, what the fuck you doing here?" She has all these tools around her. She became a handy worker. She was one of the handy workers that worked in the hotel, but she was a woman that got trained in the construction program. Those are things that happened, which is beautiful. You feel good about it when things like that happen.

... *pero* it didn't happen just in construction. It happened in all kinds of fields: cooking, movies. Some of the top actors in this country now.... came from our system. We presented Spike Lee in our film program when he was a teenager. He became one of the greatest filmmakers now in America. So things like that are beautiful.

(Garcia pp. 21-22)

"What could they do? We're still around. We're still doing projects. They tried to destroy—it hurt us a lot because hundreds of artists had to go all over the metropolitan area to do the work, and a lot of them couldn't do the work because very few people would let them work for free in the center. It hurt, and in general, history shows that for every dollar that the city invests in the arts, they get fifteen dollars back, either cash, or facility or whatever. I don't create that history. I'm not part of those big high-class galleries. I always was part of the lower. *Pero* even what we did, you could see the money being generated and the services being given to people for free in parks and in community centers. We are still doing that."

(Garcia p.24)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Carlos Garcia

Community organizer Carlos Garcia (1946?-) discusses his life history and activism in the Lower East Side neighborhood of Manhattan as a founding member of the organization, CHARAS [Chino, Humberto, Angelo, Roy, Anthony and Sal] Incorporated.

Born in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, Garcia moved to New York City with his parents, who relocated to find employment. Garcia and his brothers and sisters lived in East Harlem with extended family, including their aunt, grandmother, and cousins before moving into a larger apartment in Chelsea, an area which Garcia remembers as a “very strong Puerto Rican neighborhood before it got gentrified” (1). Here, Garcia attended PS 11 on 22nd Street and PS 3 in the West Village before the family moved to the Lower East Side in 1958 when he was eleven or twelve years old. There he was a student at PS 188.

Garcia recalls several experiences from his childhood, including his first memory of snow, being a second-language learner in New York public schools during the 1950s, a time when students who did not speak English were assigned to special education classes, and going to English language movies with his cousins and siblings, hearing people in the audience translating for each other. Noting the power of art on an audience, Garcia moves ahead in time, recounting a project with poet and playwright Miguel Piñero in which Garcia and Piñero deescalated an audience that had been moved to anger by the production.

Returning to his childhood, Garcia reflects on youth culture. Garcia discusses divisions and loyalties within groups of youth (especially alliances between black youth from the Caribbean and Puerto Rican young people) and explains gangs as a response to individual prejudice and systemic racism, rather than groups dedicated to crime. He mentions association with the Assassins, a Puerto Rican gang in Chelsea, which he states he joined at age ten. Garcia participated in forming the Real Great Society in 1965, a group he states claimed a membership of one thousand young people in New York City and northern New Jersey.

Facing legal trouble as a teen, Garcia discusses being sent to Puerto Rico to live with family for a few years, where uncles exposed him to socialist politics and Puerto Rican nationalism. He remembers that at the time of his return, he was concerned with issues affecting the Puerto Rican community as a nationality and class. At 18, he was recruited by Lower East Side Puerto Rican housing activist Ernesto Martinez to be a youth representative on the Delancey Street project, where he worked with activist Frances Goldin.

Garcia touches on the transition from the Real Great Society, which focused on education, to CHARAS, which he describes as a multiple issue organization. After forming as a youth group, the Real Great Society recruited volunteers who helped them to pursue grant funding and expand their programing. Early programs, sometimes as many as one hundred at a time, ran concurrently and focused on education and job training. Garcia mentions collaborators, including mathematician Robert Buckminster Fuller, who consulted with CHARAS for years and brainstormed about alternative energy and sweat equity. CHARAS worked in partnership with Adopt-A-Building on housing issues and alternative energy projects.

Garcia recalls the acquisition of PS 64, its dilapidated condition, and the founding of El Bohio Community Center in 1979. Garcia describes El Bohio as a multi-purpose community

center that served up to 2,000 people. No one was turned away for lack of funds, and the space hosted community meetings, programs for children, and exhibitions by artists, dancers, and musicians. Garcia shares a story about running into a woman who was working in construction years after she completed job training in one of the programs, and he mentions filmmaker Spike Lee as one of the exhibiting artists.

Garcia describes the transition in management from Adopt-A-Building to CHARAS, which managed the building for thirty years until 2001 and concludes with his account of interactions with the Giuliani Administration, including former Deputy Mayor Randy Mastro, that led to the sale of PS 64 to a developer. Garcia describes the impact of the building sale on artists, as well as the efforts of the New York legal community and businesses, who donated time and funds to help. Garcia disputes the developer's use of the building as a hostel, arguing that a hostel does not fall within designations for community use.

The interview concludes with a short discussion of the migrations of artists away from New York City, Garcia's commentary on what makes an artist, and a few memories of the Russian immigrant writer, Yuri Kapralov, with whom Garcia grew up.

General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. GVSHP began the East Village Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP East Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing East Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

Oral History Interview Transcript

Zapol: So this is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. This is Liza Zapol. I'm at the Neighborhood Preservation Council, the offices of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, and today is May 6, 2015. I'm here with—and if I can ask you to introduce yourself, please.

Garcia: Yeah, my name is Carlos Chino Garcia, and I'm from CHARAS [Chino, Humberto, Angelo, Roy, Anthony and Sal] Incorporated. We do a lot of projects all over the city, but we are mainly a Lower East Side organization. We do multi-cultural programs, so we're pretty mixed.

Zapol: As I said, we'll start at the beginning, so if you can tell me where and when you were born and a little about your early childhood—

Garcia: I was born in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, which is part of the metropolitan area of Puerto Rico, which people know as San Juan. I came to the United States when I was around five years old in 1951. I first came to East Harlem as a kid, then we moved to Chelsea. Chelsea at one time was a very strong Puerto Rican neighborhood before it got gentrified. I think the few Latinos that are left are in the Housing Authority. Other than that, in the private homes or buildings there are hardly any of them left. Basically, I moved to the Lower East Side in 1958, and I have been living here since then.

Zapol: What brought your family to America, to East Harlem?

Garcia: Oh, mainly for work. First my uncles came in the [19]40s during World War II, those that weren't working for the military. After they came they brought us kids, mainly to work and make money because they found good jobs here in the United States.

Zapol: So when you say 'us,' who came? Who in your family came?

Garcia: Oh, my mother, father, and my brothers and sisters.

Zapol: How many brothers—

Garcia: From my part of the family. Then you had other uncles that came and aunts, et cetera, et cetera. But the majority of my family's still in Puerto Rico. A lot of them didn't want to come

here. Those that came to look for work more than anything else. At that time, that's where the Puerto Ricans used to come. Now, in this modern age, the Puerto Ricans usually go to Atlanta, New Orleans, southern cities—Fort Lauderdale. They usually go to that part of the United States now because rents are cheaper, and they could get jobs a lot faster.

Zapol: Do you remember first arriving in the United States? What are your memories of that?

Garcia: Oh, when I first got here, it was winter before Christmas. Me and my brothers and sisters, we remember as little kids playing in the snow. We never saw snow before! [laughs] So basically it was beautiful. We had a nice time. There were a couple of big snows, like blizzards, so we were able to make tunnels through the mountains of snow, just to play. We used to love the snow. We used to pray for a snow day. Usually you didn't go to school, so that's one of the other reasons we loved it. It was beautiful.

It's interesting because we didn't speak English. What they did is in the schools they used to put us—Now, in this modern age, they have programs for non-speaking English kids. At that time, they used to put all the kids that came from Puerto Rico who didn't speak English at the special educational type of classes, [as] if we were dumb, or we were sick, or we were mentally ill, or something like that—which to be honest with you, I didn't mind because you're young, you're not prejudiced. All the kids that needed special attention, they become your friends, *pero* then you realize that, whatever. Why do they have me in this class? That's when you find out since we didn't speak English, they assumed that something was wrong with us. They put you in those types of classes, but as a little kid, you learn English pretty fast. Whenever you don't want to speak, you will tell people, "Don't speak the English." [laughs] If you felt it wasn't to your benefit to speak English. You understand what I mean? **[00:06:34]**

Zapol: Can you give me an example of when you would pretend you didn't speak English?

Garcia: Whenever somebody or some authority would question you, and you felt it wasn't to your benefit to speak English, you just didn't speak it. You forced them to get a translator. At that time they didn't have too many translators, so some people would come [laughs]—it was funny. Some people would come and do their best to try to translate to you. At that time, I also learned English as a kid, my brothers and sisters and I. Therefore, if we felt they were lying, they

would say something in English, and they didn't know that we understood it. What do you call it? We also used to kid with people because it was to our advantage.

To be honest with you, I remember mostly all of us learned English fast. Within a couple of years we learned English. The funniest part about it is being in a movie house and watching a movie. They didn't show too many Spanish movies at that time in New York, so they would show all those John Wayne movies, so it's translating to Puerto Ricans, [and] they speak English. [laughs] Sometimes it was hard to hear in the theater, because half of the theater was translating to the [laughs] other half. There would be your cousins or your friends that come from Puerto Rico. "What did he say, what did he say?" and we're talking. In the theater you hear all these voices and noise. Us poor kids, we get involved in the movie, and when the cowboy slaps another one, we told him, "Hit him harder!" [laughs] in Spanish. We get involved in the movie. I always thought that was beautiful, because we started arguing with the movie. The Puerto Ricans that didn't understand English, they start asking you, "What are you saying?" [laughs] All that is going on at the same time. I never forget that about theaters—that the audience in itself was interesting. Just watching the audience in relationship to the film, I'll tell you. It's very interesting.

Third World people, especially from the lower class like we were get emotionally involved, so a whole bunch of times that we did theater—This could happen also with white people, too. They are poor and working class.

CHARAS, we did a lot of productions, and one time we did this production with Miguel Piñero—which he became a very famous person—and a couple of other actors. It was about this story written by Miguel Algarín about this evil Vietnam veteran that had a retarded brother, and he was really evil. That production, my brother was the light technician. I'm part of the production of the play. As the movie goes on, the audience—this is a Third World audience—wanted to kill that guy that was evil to his little brother. His brother was a mentally ill kid, and he would take advantage of him. All his frustration of Vietnam, he would take it out on his brother. The audience kept on saying, "You son-of-a-bitch, when we catch you, we are gonna kill you." The audience [laughs] is talking to the actor. My brother is behind with the sound man in the production, technically, and just when the play is finishing, he comes over to me and says, "Hey, Chino, I think you better send some of the guys outside." I said, "Why?" He said, "There's a lot of these people that want to beat up"—[laughs] I don't want to say the name of the actor, but

they wanted to [laughs] beat him up! I went outside, and the audience, a whole bunch of them were outside, waiting to beat [the actor] up, [laughs] so Miguel Piñero, we had to go and talk them out of it. [laughs] “Oh, his abuse—“ In Spanish, they’re telling us, “Oh, his abuse! The way he treated his little brother! We’re going to kill him for that!” Miguel Piñero’s telling them, “This is not real. [laughs] This is a play!” So that kind of stuff. It’s interesting how people get involved with emotion. **[00:12:42]**

When I mention as a kid coming through theater, and the same thing with plays as an adult, you know—

Zapol: Yeah.

Garcia: People really get emotionally—I mean serious. You go, wait a minute. [laughs]

Zapol: Where was that movie theater that you would go to? Was that in East Harlem, or—

Garcia: There’s a few in East Harlem. The Elgin Theater, which is now the Joyce Theater on Eighth Avenue, that used to be called the Elgin Theater—before it became the Joyce Theater on Eighth Avenue, I think it is? That used to be a Latino [theater] where they would show Spanish and English films. At one time before television, there were a lot of movie houses. You don’t hardly see them anymore, *pero* before television, there were hundreds of movie houses down here. Manhattan, you could go into mostly any avenue and find a few movie houses, because that used to be the main way people see media, through movie houses.

Zapol: So would you—

Garcia: Even the newsreel was in movie houses.

Zapol: Would you go to movies often, or would you go on a special day? Would you go with your parents, or just with your siblings, or friends?

Garcia: Well, as kids on weekends, our parents used to get rid of us, and one way to get rid of us from the house is by sending us to the movies as a family. Seven of us would go. It was only fifty cents, and you could get a soda and a popcorn for twenty-five cents or less. Our parents, they were working class people, and they wanted to take a break from us. We all lived in a small apartment. They would send me and my cousins, and we would go see movies. At that time, they

used to give you like two to three movies, and then a whole bunch of cartoons, plus the newsreels, so you could stay in the movie house for six hours. [laughter] You didn't have to get out, and the whole neighborhood was there, so it was a lot of fun. **[00:15:05]**

Zapol: Yeah.

Garcia: Besides seeing the movie, the whole neighborhood and kids from your school, everybody's in the theater. I tell you, there would be hundreds of people inside those theaters. Now theaters are very small, but at that time, those theaters were like two thousand people, fifteen hundred people. That was the whole neighborhood. It became like a hangout for us as kids during the daytime, anyway.

Zapol: What was the work that your parents were doing, and what influenced your move to Chelsea?

Garcia: Yeah, my father was a construction worker, *pero* because of racism, he didn't get too much work in construction in the city that paid well. He could always get cheap construction labor, *pero* he made more money as a waiter in a hotel. He spoke English well. He was really handsome, and he got good jobs in very fancy hotels. He made more money as a waiter.

My mother was a seamstress, a member of the union. Her, mostly all her girlfriends, and other family members, they all worked in the garment center. On the side, most of the members of the family had little entrepreneur businesses on the side in order to survive. *Pero* basically, my mother was a seamstress, and a lot of my aunts and cousins, female cousins, they mostly all worked in the garment center. Men, too, worked in the garment center, but they had different jobs. Cutting—my uncle was a major cutter, and that's a heavy profession. They pay you good when you know how to cut the material. He was very successful in that, and my other cousins had different parts of—well, part—of the garment industry. A lot of them were around the Garment District, and then I had other members in the Diamond District, which still exists. The Garment District is not as big as it used to [be], but the Diamond District, in the 40s—it's still there, and still, I have cousins working there.

Zapol: So—

Garcia: That was the main trade. A lot of my cousins and uncles did construction on the side as contractors. *Pero* they won't work for any other person, because they used to usually get very little pay by construction companies, and they won't let them join the union.

Zapol: What were some of the jobs that your parents would do on the side? You said everybody would do some kind of job on the side—

Garcia: Different jobs, you know. I had some aunts that would go clean houses. My mother used to sell cheap jewelry in different stores and things like that. So different little jobs like that, odd jobs. Nothing big.

Zapol: What—

Garcia: Separate from the regular job.

Zapol: What influenced your move to Chelsea? Why did your family move to Chelsea?

Garcia: Oh, for a bigger apartment. We were living in Harlem with our aunt. Some of us were living with our aunt and uncle, and they had their own kids, which was nice because you get closer to your cousins when you live with them, when you have to share a bed with them. I used to stay with my grandmother in East Harlem, also. Basically, in Chelsea they have bigger apartments. And it was a developing Latino community in Chelsea—a lot of Puerto Ricans there.

Zapol: Did you switch schools when you went to Chelsea, as well?

Garcia: Yeah, they sent us to a Lower East Side school after we left Chelsea.

Zapol: After you left Chelsea.

Garcia: Uh-huh. [00:19:57]

Zapol: So you were in school in East Harlem, and then in Chelsea, and then—

Garcia: No, not me, I was too young, *pero* my brothers were. I was too young to be in school.

Zapol: OK. So you started school in Chelsea, and then you went—

Garcia: Yeah, I started in PS 11 on 22nd Street.

Zapol: I see.

Garcia: You know?

Zapol: Yup.

Garcia: I think now it's some kind of a community center. I don't think it's a public school anymore. Then I went to PS 3, which is also—well, PS 3 is more in the West Village, and then from PS 3 I came to 188 here in the Lower East Side.

Zapol: Where did your family live in the Lower East Side?

Garcia: Oh, we used to live on Avenue—at Columbia and Avenue D. Right on the corner.

Zapol: What are your memories of that move, and what it was like? How old were you then?

Garcia: I probably was around eleven—no, no, no—around eleven, twelve years old, around that age. It was [a] good memory, because I made friends quick in the Lower East Side when I moved to the neighborhood.

First of all, the nice thing about it [was] mostly everybody moved in at the same time. People didn't have cliques. You understand what I mean? It was a Housing Authority complex, so there were two buildings and hundreds of kids moving almost around the same period, so we became friends quickly. There wasn't any group yet established. We started establishing groups after that between us.

But when we moved into the area, hundreds of people moving at the same time within a period of a month or so, there were hundreds of us. I think it's rough when you're moving to a neighborhood that's already established, because then you've got to break in. When you have everybody moving in almost at the same time, you create your own rules as friends. You have to—

Zapol: So this was around 1957 or so?

Garcia: Yeah, 1958, something like that. New school, new building. Everything was new.

Zapol: Tell me about maybe your closest friend. Who was your first good friend in your new apartment building?

Garcia: You mean in the Lower East Side? Let me see. I'm still very close to people in Chelsea, and what do you call that? One of the girls that I met when I first came to the United States became one of the leaders, also, of our organization. Her name's Angie Hernandez [phonetic] [00:23:27] She became a folk dancer—Puerto Rican dances.

Then, in the Lower East Side, I became very close to people that also started, helped start the organization CHARAS—Chino, Humberto, Angelo, Roy, Anthony and Sal—or, we used to call ourselves the 'Real Great Society.' Then we changed it to CHARAS. They were involved for many years. A lot of them have passed away little by little, but some of them have retired.

Pero a lot of my friends became friends for many years, and a lot of us became organizers. Yesterday, in the presentation—When I was younger, I used to organize in Baltimore, so since Baltimore has been in the speech, I gave a story of a young Puerto Rican for the Lower East Side that went to Baltimore to organize in a situation where there wasn't any group to look out for the interest of the Latinos. I went there to help them, and so basically, those are things that happen. He came from our neighborhood, too. [00:24:58]

Those things happen, so a lot of people that I got involved are still—since we were young, they became also leaders. There's also sad news. Some of them became drug addicts. Some of them became major drug dealers, so it goes either way.

Zapol: You said that when you started, everybody was new, but then things started to divide among people. You started to kind of make your own groups. Can you talk to me about what were some of the divisions that started to be created? What were the borders of the neighborhood? Can you tell me a story about—

Garcia: Well, the division takes place basically on needs of people, basically. For example, the reason a lot of us started gangs, it wasn't to become criminals. It was to protect ourselves from other nationalities. Then we started getting involved with crime and things like that, but the original idea was protection, because as a clique, you become very strong. Our strength became more than a thousand members, [laughs] so people mess with us, you will be in trouble.

That's one of the reasons. The crime and the drugs came later, but the original idea is none of us grew up to be criminals. We got into it for reasons that we didn't have really any major control [over]. It becomes like part of the culture, of a situation.

That was the division, and there were different groups in the Lower East Side—Italians, Jewish, blacks. The Puerto Ricans [are] an interesting culture, because we are very integrated among ourselves. The Puerto Rican [society] itself is a very integrated society, especially us, the working poor class of the Puerto Ricans. We are very integrated. Within our families, we got blonde, blue eyes, black people. Just families alone, imagine.

Our situation became mainly for protection and looking out for our backs against other negative forces that were against us, and we formed a pretty well-organized group. We scattered all over the city and parts of Jersey City, too.

Zapol: How did the group begin? How did it start? You know what, I'm going to pause this for one second.

[INTERRUPTION]

Just to resume, I was asking you about—yeah, how did this group—you were saying there were a thousand of us in Jersey and in Manhattan, and in—

Garcia: Mmhm.

Zapol: How did the group start? How did you start getting involved?

Garcia: There would be problems that affect the Puerto Ricans in a particular area, and they needed help, so basically we would go and help them no matter where they were. Most of us, we knew each other, because we would have cousins or friends in different parts of the metropolitan area. If a particular group had a problem, it was common sense to go and talk to other Puerto Ricans and tell them, “Look, we have a problem with so-and-so, and we’re going to confront them. Could you help back us up or something?” And we would go back them up. Usually that’s how we associated. We also [had] big parties, et cetera, et cetera, socially. It wasn’t all fights all the time. It was a lot of fun, too. *Pero* basically that’s how we all looked out for each other’s backs. As a Puerto Rican, we had to look out for our interests because there were people that were strictly prejudiced against us. I don’t know for what. I never did anything. I never did anything to any of them, *pero* the prejudice was there. But it just doesn’t happen in the street. It happens with housing. It happens with all kinds of stuff. It’s this racial thing against us.

[00:30:25]

Zapol: Can—

Garcia: It's like an animal gets trapped. They're hit in the back, and of course if people mention it to—see, that's the trick, how as a gang, physically, we would react. Chances are we would react violently, *pero* then we started saying, "Wait a minute. This is not just people in the street or something." This is a society is attacking us through the Board of Education, housing situation, jobs. This is not—A lot of us, we became leaders because we said, "We're getting screwed by the society, not just a couple of thugs." They might be Italians, or they might be Irish or something like this. This is a society that is attacking us. So that's how come we started organizing as an activist movement.

Zapol: I have a couple questions about this. One is do you have memories of overt racism when you were growing up? Maybe—

Garcia: Oh, yeah, people calling me 'spics.' Oh yeah, we had that.

Zapol: What was the first time you remember some, as a child?

Garcia: Oh, I can't remember, but it happened—

Zapol: Yeah, all the time.

Garcia:—throughout my life as a young man, and it happened as an adult. People calling you 'nigger,' 'spic,' and that kind of stuff. We had to defend ourselves against that kind of stuff.

Zapol: And then how did you start to become aware of more of the larger institutional racism? How did you become—start to see that?

Garcia: When you're having a discussion as family or friends, and then you realize that everybody's having the same problem, [laughs] you go, "Damn," [laughs] "this happened to you, too?" And they go, "Yeah, yeah, we've got to do something about it." You understand? Because people are having the same problems, and then you notice the other people that are having the same problem happen to be the same type of people you are, racially and nationality-wise. And that's how you really realize that you're getting screwed somehow.

Zapol: Your mother was in the union. Did you have examples among your uncles or other family members of leadership? Because it sounds like you started to learn about your own role as a leader pretty young. How did you find that within yourself?

Garcia: A lot of the stuff happens when groups get together and you begin discussions. Those type of situations, you will recognize leadership when people are talking as a group about a problem and how it's going to be handled—who's going to go after so-and-so, who's going to specialize in a particular problem. That's how leadership is developed more naturally. You don't make a leader. Leaders usually present themselves—male, female. When the problem is serious and their group is talking, usually some people become good at specialties. That's how they are usually created. We didn't send anybody to college to become a leader, through school, anything like that. Basically, it came out of discussions, arguments, and debates, and that's how leadership begins. Some people just want to be simple and participate, but [they don't necessarily] want to be leaders, you know what I mean?

Zapol: How did you discover that you wanted to be a leader? **[00:35:07]**

Garcia: Yeah, you don't want to be. They make you. People choose you to represent them. And basically because they trust you. A lot of it is based on trust. People develop a feeling that they could trust you to represent them and that's usually how you become a representative. Because people trust you. You don't run for that, it just happens.

Zapol: So did that start with the gangs? In—

Garcia: Yeah, it started at a young age in the gang.

Zapol: What was the gang that you were a leader in, and how did that then shift to you being an activist?

Garcia: Well, I used to be associated with the Assassins, and I joined the Assassins when I was around ten years old. The original body of the Assassins came out of Chelsea, and it was mainly a Puerto Rican group of people, but there were also some blacks in it because the blacks were having the same problem we were having. So some of them joined the group in Chelsea.

There weren't too many blacks in Chelsea when we first started going there in the early [19]50s. But those that were there usually—it's interesting. Usually in that case you have North

American blacks, and then you have islander blacks, the blacks that are from the islands. I'm talking about Jamaica and some of those islands. A lot of them are mainly blacks that came here as immigrants. They used to trust the Puerto Ricans [more] than anybody else, so they always used to associate themselves with Puerto Ricans. To this day, they still have a good relationship with the Puerto Ricans, and mainly because the Puerto Ricans politically were pretty strong, and we also are islanders, and we're very integrated, too. Those are things that are interesting, where the communities of immigrants begin to see where they will get the most help. That included the Dominicans, that included the Jamaicans, the Haitians—the whole culture.

Zapol: Did you stay with the Assassins through—

Garcia: For many years, yeah.

Zapol: For many years?

Garcia: Yeah.

Zapol: And then how did your experience there shift into some kind of community activism and leadership?

Garcia: Remember what I mentioned earlier? When we decided that we should concentrate on how to deal with the society as a whole, we knew that you cannot call yourself ‘the [laughs] assassin.’ I mean it’s common sense. So we created organizations to represent legal authorities of the community.

Zapol: So—

Garcia: Imagine if you called yourselves the ‘Assassins Incorporated.’ [laughter]

Zapol: I read a story—I think it was the *Life* magazine article about you—

Garcia: Mmhm.

Zapol:—where they talked about when you were seventeen, you were posed with a choice to face some kind of legal trouble or to go to Puerto Rico. Was that a turning point for you? Can you talk about what happened, about that story, and then what happened when you returned?

Garcia: My family felt that something is going to happen to me, seriously, if I stayed in this country, so they decided—the family in Puerto Rico and here—they decided that it's better if I go to Puerto Rico and stayed there. It was true. I didn't disagree with them. It was a family discussion.**[00:40:28]**

I was getting in a lot of trouble, and I didn't know where I was going as a young man. My family, my uncle in Puerto Rico and my father, his brother, they felt that if I were to go there, I would get a chance to think. I could work with a family construction company in the island, and to financially—

I went, and I did a lot of thinking, and they were right because they're looking out for my back. That's where the family becomes important, where they've got to think about that—and I'm glad that they thought like that.

I used to go to Puerto Rico every summer. I was one of the only ones in my family that used to like to do that. My brothers and sisters didn't care much, not like me. I used to love to go to Puerto Rico.

Zapol: Why?

Garcia: It's like when I'm there, it's like part of my life. It's like your own country, and you're having—it's a culture, you know what I mean? It's a culture that you want to keep. You never want to lose it, so I used to go. Plus, I got a huge family there. It's unbelievable how big it is, so it's nice to see them once in a while.

They made the right decision for me, because I always felt that if I go there—at first, I thought about it, *pero* when I decided to go—Remember, I had to also decide on that, besides my uncle and my father. I decided I wanted to do it, because I felt they were looking out for my back, always. To the day that they die, I know that they're looking out for my back. That's the main interest. There's no selfishness involved. It's mainly friendship, love, and family. So, I was happy that I did it when I did return.

Also politically, my uncles, they made me think about all kinds of stuff. Politically, to the point—

Zapol: Were they involved in politics in Puerto Rico?

Garcia: Oh yeah, in socialism and nationalism. There was every reason that you could think of [laughs] in the family. You know what I mean? People understood different opinions. In the feeling of issues, I learned a lot, analyzing issues, discussing issues, and that kind of stuff. That helped me a lot when I came back, because I started seeing every point and finding out what's the basis of those points, negative or positive—how it [is] going to benefit me or us as a people.

All those things, I learned being associated with friends and family in Puerto Rico as a young man.

Zapol: In 1960 you came back from Puerto Rico?

Garcia: I think 1960—

Zapol: Four?

Garcia: The end of sixty-four, I think, almost.

Zapol: And that was when you formed the Real Great Society?

Garcia: That's when we started talking about it. Technically, I think it was 1965, *pero* that's when we started talking about it.

Zapol: So how did—tell me about what those discussions were like, who was involved and what you were inspired by. **[00:45:04]**

Garcia: Well, there was a whole bunch of young people involved. We were all young, and some of the guys really wanted to deal with drugs and that kind of stuff because there's money in it. Other people wanted to join the Army, because a lot of people joined the military from my neighborhood because of the benefits. There were a lot of benefits being offered to them. It's sad because the few that went to the Army ended up dying in Vietnam, like around 1965, [19]66, friends of ours from the neighborhood. So that was really sad.

As an organization, meaning the gang, everybody had to make a decision what they wanted to do. Some of us were pushing to getting involved more and become activists, without knowing what the word ‘activist’ meant, but becoming involved in issues that concern us as working-class Puerto Rican people. Some of the other guys wanted to go to the Army, and some

of the other people wanted to become just workers. Nobody talked of college, but people talked of becoming technicians of some kind—electricians, whatever, that sort of thing.

Then there was the drug situation. Some of the guys decided to become involved in drugs. Some of them became major drug dealers in the Bronx and in the Lower East Side. All that took place.

Zapol: Talk to me about on your return what you wanted to do. What you were in—

Garcia: I was more concerned [with] issues, community issues—issues that affect us as a nationality and that kind of stuff, as a class. That was my interest. I feel very strongly that that was my goal to take that route. Other people decided to do the same thing, so that was a good move.

Zapol: Did you have role models, or people in terms of theory, or in terms of other leaders or activists that you wanted to model yourself to?

Garcia: No, not really. At that time there wasn't that many in general, *pero* the few that were around, we joined them in issues. There have always been older people that we respect in the community, so they sort of became role models. I felt very strongly that I appreciated the time that I spent with them and that I learned from them. Not necessarily just Puerto Ricans, *pero* all kinds of people.

Zapol: Last night was an event, you alluded to it, but just to say, it was an event to honor heroes, community heroes, right?

Garcia: Uh huh.

Zapol: And so I wonder if you had heroes. Last night's event was for the Historic Commission, the Lower East Side Historic Commission.

Garcia: Yeah.

Zapol: Yeah. So I'm wondering if you had heroes in your mind that you wanted to be like when you were thinking about organizing.

Garcia: When we were young, there wasn't that much. It doesn't mean it didn't exist, *pero* [there weren't a lot of role models] that we ourselves knew, so a lot of stuff that we came out with were ideas among ourselves. There wasn't that much. We started learning more about other people afterwards, and we started negotiating and talking to all kinds of people. We didn't have images of people specifically because we were beginning something new. [00:50:36]

Then we started learning about people and that those existed. We became close to them. If they needed our help, we would help them. For example, the project that's being developed now in Delancey Street, Ernesto Martinez—he was a major Puerto Rican activist in the Lower East Side—recruited me as a youth representative. I was eighteen years old. Never did I think that the project was going to take forty-three years to [laughs]—So I went beyond the youth, you know what I mean? That was together with Frances Goldin, who is a very well respected woman in the Lower East Side.

But anyway, those are things that happened. When we met, the question was, what would I do, being so young? I was a young man, and I was also a leader of a big youth group in the neighborhood, so basically he felt that he needed our help.

So all those things take place as times go by. But I did not know Ernesto when we first started organizing as a youth group—

Zapol: So talk to me about—

Garcia:—*pero* he was around, and we became friends.

Zapol: What happened—after you formed as a youth group, then, how did you start to get more attention or funding for your, for the Real Great Society?

Garcia: We got volunteers that used to hang out with us. Because mostly all of us were Catholics—not necessarily all of us, *pero* mostly all of us. There were some Catholic volunteers in the neighborhood working with the church, and they started telling me, “If you want to do this project, they have monies for that,” so we would go and write proposals. We would get people that know how to write proposals, and tell them to prepare proposals for one of those projects.

Zapol: What were the—

Garcia: That's how we did it. At the beginning, we didn't know about writing proposals. We didn't know about foundations. We didn't know about government grants or anything like that. We learned that mainly as we went along. People that used to volunteer for the Catholic church or for other organizations, the settlement house and things like that, they used to come and help us.

We always had a place in different locations in the neighborhood. We used to call them social clubs. They mainly were our locations of keeping the group together.

Zapol: Where were some of those places?

Garcia: Oh, they were all over the Lower East Side, scattered. We had a few places. That's what's important. That used to keep us pretty united, the locations. They were social clubs, technically. People would play pool. They would play music, dancing on weekends, that kind of stuff.

Zapol: What were some of your first big projects that you did as an organization?

Garcia: Basically, education. After-school programs, training, teaching people how to do certain types of jobs, and a lot of that was done voluntarily. People that knew would teach people that didn't know, and like that, it worked. It kept on moving on, and all kinds of projects, and it was hundreds of projects that got developed. [00:55:16]

Zapol: How did you manage all of the many projects that were happening at the same time?

Garcia: A lot of the volunteer work. A lot of it was done by respect and wanting to be helpful to somebody else. When you start getting grants and things, you create management and that kind of stuff, and you hire a lot of people, too. [They are] not necessarily part of the main group, *pero* they become employees. They will manage things. You just make sure that they do whatever we agree to.

Zapol: I also read something about a relationship with R. Buckminster Fuller.

Garcia: Oh yeah, yeah, we became friends of Buckminster Fuller because one time we were talking about alternative technologies. We started talking about alternative technology in 1965. We were talking about green roof in 1965 and alternative energy and all that stuff, already with a

lot of other people based on discussion more than actual science. [laughs] We were talking about housing. We were talking already about sweat equity and all those type of ideas. I am always being myself, and as a leader, you don't talk about things. Let's go and do it, and if it works, works; if it doesn't work, [laughs] well, it's not going to kill you.

One time I was talking with some friends, and they were mentioning this guy named Buckminster Fuller. He really was talking about all kinds of ways of doing this with less material. You could talk about renovating a building, but it's going to cost you a fortune, so how [do] you do it [in a way] that it's cheaper? How you do it [so] it's economical, and then, could the people that are going to be living in it be part of the construction? So all those things. Bucky, as a major person—one of the probably greatest architects of the United States, and he's not an architect. If you go to the Association of Architects in Washington, they have every architect since George Washington of the United States, and they all say 'architect, architect.' When it comes to Buckminster Fuller, it says 'mathematician.' He's the only one in hundreds of American architects that he doesn't have the title of architect. It says 'mathematician.' Then it continues, 'architect, architect' [laughs] It's very beautiful to be the only mathematician among thousands of architects. Anyway, I'm talking about famous architects, not just any architect.

So we contact Bucky, and we wanted him to come and speak to a whole bunch of young leaders, Third World leaders, about all these alternative possibilities. He was really nice because he came to give a speech. He was in the Christodora House when it was a community center. Now it's a high-class condominium, but it used to be a community center. He came and gave a speech there in the auditorium, and it was really nice. A lot of Black Panthers, a lot of—besides our group—Young Lords and other people came to listen to him. He gave a beautiful speech for almost two hours about the alternatives of doing things with the least material, the least money possible. It was a really good speech. **[01:00:10]**

Then after the speech, we had a luncheon—I mean a dinner—over at the University of the Street. It was a buffet type of dinner, and he talked socially with everybody, person to person, about—People really thought about it, and it was a good thing. The thing is, what we felt when we did that is people should hear other people talk about ideas. We might never do it, but at least we could talk about that. I really felt very strongly that that's how we educate ourselves, by learning from other people, even just a discussion. Even if nothing comes out of it, just a discussion is rich in itself. So it worked out, and we learned.

We had a meeting with Bucky every year after that up to the day he died. We used to meet with him and talk about different alternatives and ideas, how to do a project and use less energy and less materials and that kind of stuff. We didn't have it, so we would like to know how you do it, and he was a master of that kind of stuff. So basically we became good friends, thank god for that. You know what I mean?

Zapol: Yeah. So tell me also about the change from—

Garcia: What time you got?

Zapol: It is two forty-five now.

Garcia: OK, so—

Zapol: Fifteen more minutes.

Garcia: Yeah. Yeah, go ahead.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE, ‘Garcia_CarlosOralHistory1.mp3’; BEGINNING OF SECOND, ‘Garcia_CarlosOralHistory2.mp3’]

Zapol: Talk to me about the change from the Real Great Society to CHARAS, and then if we can talk about CHARAS and PS 64, in this next period of time—

Garcia: Yeah. The Real Great Society formed CHARAS, which is the same group. We called it one of our divisions, CHARAS. The purpose of CHARAS is to find out alternatives, and we felt very strongly that we had to change our technique of operating within a couple of years, little by little. First of all, we always felt the name, the ‘Real Great Society’ was very complicated for our people, and we should try to choose a name that sounded more Latino with one syllable or something. It’s almost like creating one product, like Mott’s candy. We decided to create a simple name and also became more multicultural. The Real Great Society was more into education. Even though it dealt with other problems in the community, education was a strong—CHARAS became a more multiple issue organization.

We gained from the Real Great Society. As people came in, we started noticing more artists came in. The thing is that a lot of our artists were activists, so they don’t worry [just] about art, but they’re also embodying all kinds of issues because they’re more [political] in the

way of thinking [of] how to handle problems. A lot of us also felt that there should be an organization that deals with different issues and never specialize just on one.

We also decided to help with alternative ideas, not necessarily manage them. Other groups would do the detail management, *pero* we became the holistic group, trying to encourage people to create ideas. Then other people could run with this. We're helping a lot of that kind of stuff. We were very helpful, working with Adopt-A-Building, working [on] housing issues and ideas, so that's where things like sweat equity came in—solar energy, wind power, all that stuff [unclear] [00:03:36].

With the art, one thing is having art that is private, but then public art becomes very important. We are still doing that—public art—because we feel that if we're going to do it, it should be for the public in general. When we were in El Bohio one time, [we were] having a discussion with this government agency, and saying, "Oh man, Chino, you only do four exhibits a year, and so-and-so does every month an exhibit," and they [would] mention other galleries in Lower Manhattan or something like that. I said, "Yeah, but they only present twelve artists, and in the four exhibits that we do, we present a thousand artists." [laughs]

It's different techniques, how you present the artists. You understand what I mean? We would do an exhibit, right, but we would have four hundred artists. We got over a thousand artists that we presented. It's different techniques. Sometimes people think that if you're going to have a gallery, you do an exhibit. Then the gallery, when it wasn't an exhibit, was a community party or meeting for drug abuse programs, recreational for kids because [of how] I mentioned earlier about Buckminster Fuller and those type of techniques—how you take a space and use it for a lot of uses.

OK, so we create a gallery, right, just to give you an example. We make the gallery big. Now [in] that gallery, there was all kinds of community activity—community meetings, conferences, political meeting, you name it. But we made sure that so many months out of the year it would be a gallery [laughs] because that's why we created it. Now it was so big that we could present four hundred artists for each exhibit, you understand, and those are the techniques that we used. So that is how you take a space like El Bohio and have it used by hundreds of people instead of a couple of people. [00:06:45]

A space like that was used by thousands every year. There were thousands of all kinds of artists—dancers, visual artists, musicians. I mean some of the best used to use it, too, besides the

common people. They would present hundreds of—every year—artists that never been seen in the city or photographers—that kind of stuff. So those are things that you have to figure out. We did that, and basically, we kept our whole philosophy and style—to present a lot to the community with the least possible that we have, and it worked.

Zapol: So from about 1981, you had El Bohio and the space in PS 64.

Garcia: Yeah, we took over the old PS 64, which then we called it ‘El Bohio Community Center.’ We took it over in the winter of [19]78, [19]79. We always use ‘79 as our measurement, but really it was that winter.

Zapol: Mmhm, mmhm.

Garcia: It was all destroyed, abandoned, abused. It was like a shooting gallery, a whole bunch of people using it for that. They robbed mostly all the metal in the building. There wasn’t any added, cable made out of copper. The main group that was in charge of that was Adopt-A-Building under the direction of Ruth Nazario [phonetic] [00:08:56] and Robin Nazario. Robin Nazario [phonetic] [00:08:58] was one of the creators of the Real Great Society, one of the originals.

It was managed by Adopt-A-Building. I think it was the first five years. Then Adopt-A-Building decided that they want to concentrate on housing, which they did. Being in El Bohio, it was mixing them with all kinds of people, and they were scared that they would lose the interest in just concentrating on housing. They turned it over to us, and we created with Adopt-A-Building El Bohio Public Development Corporation, and basically CHARAS managed that project. It operated all the way to 2001 when we left with the problems that we had with the Giuliani Administration. **[00:10:07]**

In the thirty years that we managed that building, there were thousands of people that benefited from that building. Construction training—In drug abuse alone and alcohol abuse, there was something like fifteen hundred people a week that used to go there for that, for meetings. The group that we started there [for] drug abuse started with around seven people, and by the time we closed down, they had like almost a thousand members. In the training there were thousands of people. One time in a hotel, there is this woman in Puerto Rico taking some sun, and she comes over and says, “Hey, Chino, what you doing, what you doing here?” I thought,

"Hey, what the fuck you doing here?" She has all these tools around her. She became a handy worker in the hotel. She was one of the handy workers that worked in the hotel, but she was a woman that got trained in the construction program. Those are things that happened, which is beautiful. You feel good about it when things like that happen.

Those are things that are important, *pero* it didn't happen just in construction. It happened in all kinds of fields: cooking, movies. Some of the top actors in this country now, they are from the Third World—came from our system. We presented Spike Lee in our film program when he was a teenager. He became one of the greatest filmmakers now in America. So things like that, which are beautiful. This has happened with hundreds of people. From musicians to whatever you consider art went through those doors.

I think that's what's important, all that happened. Our whole attitude was, if you got money, pay the price; if you don't have any money, then don't worry. We still will help you. "*Pero* don't lie to us," we used to tell people, "because usually we will find out if you're lying to us." And usually we used to. When some people did lie to us, do you know who used to tell us? Their own family or their friends because they went for free because they were broke, and [if] they see one of the cousins or one of the core members of the group cheating us, they will tell you, man. We didn't ask you to prove it. It's just your word. Your word is, could you afford to pay, or what? Or how much could you afford? Basically, those are the questions. People would say, "I'm unemployed," or something, so then you don't have to pay for anything. Some people say, "Oh, I'm making good money," and they will pay, and basically that's the way it was. It was a very decent way to manage things, and it's mainly a lot of trust.

Pero some people that tried to cheat us, even people from bars. If you tried to do something like that, there are a lot of decent people that would get pissed at you, and they will go and tell [unclear] [00:14:20]. "That son-of-a-bitch is working somewhere, and he makes so many thousands a month, and he's lying to you." Then we would confront [the person]. One time, I showed up at his job and said, "How you doing? I thought that you were unemployed." [laughs] "No, no, no," you understand what I mean? I would do that on purpose because if I'm in his job, he can't lie to me. If I see him in the office or something like that and ask him that, chances are that he will figure out a way how to lie, but if either me or one of my guys, we walk into his job, and say, "Oh, by the way, I thought you were unemployed—" [laughs]

Zapol: Keep people honest. [00:15:11]

Garcia: Yeah, I mean just that. Those are things. Some people, after they get caught, they show up, and they help out somehow. We don't want to be enemies with anybody if we can avoid it. Anyway, that's it, right. It's three o'clock now, so—

Zapol: It is. [Garcia laughs] I do want to ask you about what happened in 2001 with the Giuliani Administration. Do you have a moment to kind of talk about that transition?

Garcia: Yeah, we could do that. Since Giuliani became mayor, he and his staff, they started a campaign. It came right from City Hall, not the workers in the city, because we had a lot of support from the city administrations, the workers. *Pero* his staff actually told the other city administration, in writing—and I [will] always keep that letter—"From now on, no one in the department is allowed to deal with us." Everything that happens, it has to be through City Hall. It becomes political when that happens.

The city has departments to deal with people like us, and a lot of those guys, they didn't see us doing anything wrong. They used to like us, *pero* then when City Hall tells them, "No longer deal with them. They have to come through us," we had to negotiate through the city. Basically, they always tried to trap you. The first thing they say, "Oh, if you want the space, you have to give us \$1 million." Telling a person like me [laughs] to give you \$1 million—or like us, because we're a group—to give you \$1 million, that we have to buy it for \$1 million dollars, is like telling us to go to hell.

We told them, well, we could probably get \$1 million, but it's going to take us some time to get \$1 million. A long time. You know what one of those fools recommended? That we pass around cans, empty cans in the community, and people should donate some money. This was what a major Giuliani advisor is telling us. I looked at the guy, and I said, "If people go around collecting change in cans, I hope they give it to the poor, [laughs] to community groups that need it," that need it bad. I know that if we have to get \$1 million, we know where to go get it. It's just that it will take time. At the end, we came out with \$5 million in writing from a development corporation. They were friends of ours.

At the end, basically, it was an evil act, like some leader that wanted to screw you because you couldn't dance to his tune, or something like that. Right out of City Hall—no, not the city, not the city workers, not the commissioners. It's that clique that was doing it to us. Then the guy in charge of that clique, who was Giuliani's main assistant, started working for the guy

that bought the building. His name is Randy Mastro [and] was the deputy mayor to Giuliani, the main deputy mayor.

What could they do? We're still around. We're still doing projects. They tried to destroy—it hurt us a lot because hundreds of artists had to go all over the metropolitan area to do the work, and a lot of them couldn't do the work because very few people would let them work for free in the center. It hurt, and in general, history shows that for every dollar that the city invests in the arts, they get fifteen dollars back, either cash, or facility or whatever. I don't create that history. I'm not part of those big high-class galleries. I always was part of the lower. *Pero* even what we did, you could see the money being generated and the services being given to people for free in parks and in community centers. We are still doing that.

Basically, it was just an evil act by a whole bunch of political creeps, and they had the legal control. We tried everything legally. The Puerto Rican Legal Defense and other lawyers, they volunteered to help us. Even the ones that we had to pay, because we had to spend a lot of money. I think in legal services we spent thousands of dollars. We got free lawyers. We calculated that out of the free lawyers it was over \$300,000 because you've got to calculate the volunteers, how much they're worth. Out of cash, we probably spent over \$70,000 that we had to raise. **[00:22:00]**

At the end, we gave them a letter. A company wrote them a letter and said, "Look, we put up \$5 million to help them buy the building and develop it." They still didn't want to talk to us. They would not talk to our lawyer. Our lawyer went there, and he sat in front of Giuliani's office for almost seven hours after they said that they would meet with us. They said that they would meet with us. They never met with him. He had that letter. At the end, they decided to sell it to this guy. I don't know, *pero* if the guy that was in charge of the Giuliani Administration starts working for him—[laughs] you know what I mean?

When that happened, we discussed [it with our lawyers] and said, "Let's go out there." I said, "It's a waste of time. If we get the building back, we'll probably do it other ways." I really don't want to get—Me personally, I don't want to be on that level of arguing that stuff. You know what I mean? It's terrible, *pero* it happened. There's nothing we can do about that.

Zapol: So—

Garcia: We might get the building back. We're always trying, figuring out ways to do it.

Zapol: Yeah, talk to me about the resolution in December 2013 about the city deciding that they will give the building back to you. What's your perspective on that?

Garcia: 2000 and what?

Zapol: Thirteen. Just the December resolution against the developer, because the developer wasn't doing any work.

Garcia: Well, first of all, we always argued when he bought it. What he wants out of that building to this day is to create a youth hostel. The way he's going to try to do it, right—the contract that he has with the city is to make it a community facility. A dormitory or youth hostel is not a community facility. How does that benefit the community? Therefore, he's been trying to do slick things with several colleges and non-profits. The thing is that the guy thinks that the community will have to develop hundreds and thousands of units and centers in that neighborhood. That's not a stupid group. That community is very smart, you know. I keep on telling him that is not a community facility, what's what he's trying to do. That's what he's trying to do. He's trying to figure out a way. [00:25:25]

Zapol: I see.

Garcia: Now, people say, how do you keep it empty for so long? Well, in this country when the rich lose money, they just get tax extensions from the money that they lose. He could keep it like that for another thirty years, and he just writes it off as a business loss. When businesses lose money, they write it off their taxes, so they don't have to pay taxes to the government. I don't know how rich he is. According to our research, his family has done this in quite a few places in the United States, keep land as long as they can. He's hoping that the building falls. He can't knock it down because it's a landmark, so he's trying to destroy it in a way, hoping that it falls.

Zapol: Because it's a landmark.

Garcia: It's a landmark, yeah. That's the only way you could destroy that building, if it falls. The trouble is that that building, to fall, believe me—Every wall in the exterior is two feet wide [laughs]. I don't think that building would fall that easily. But maybe. That's a hell of a building. I'm telling you, each wall in the exterior is two feet wide, so I don't think that's going to fall.

Zapol: Yeah.

Garcia: Anyway—

Zapol: So I want to—

Garcia:—nice talking with you.

Zapol: Yeah, I want to thank you for today, and—

Garcia: If you have any questions and something, just call me.

Zapol: OK.

Garcia: You got my number. Call.

**[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE, ‘Garcia_CarlosOralHistory2.mp3’; BEGINNING OF
THIRD, ‘Garcia_CarlosOralHistory3.mp3’]**

Garcia: Even though a lot of us didn’t understand where it was going, just being there, hundreds of us. We all were neighborhood friends, like we all been playing with each other, not necessarily paying attention to the [unclear] [00:00:16]—

Zapol: Right.

Garcia:—you know what I mean? [laughs]

Zapol: But also with El Bohio, that also was a big gathering space with a lot of people—

Garcia: Oh yeah!

Zapol:—to bring people through.

Garcia: Oh, beautiful, hundreds of people.

Zapol: Are there spaces like that anymore that you go to?

Garcia: Not in that style. Not in the city, either. In the city it’s precious, this space now. So expensive! It’s very expensive in Manhattan to have projects like that anymore. They can’t afford it. Storefronts are going down for like \$5[,000], \$10,000 a month, so a lot of creative

people can't work in New York anymore. A lot of them go to other locations. A lot of the good artists from here, they went to Harlem. Now some of them cannot even be in Harlem anymore because it's so expensive over there. They're going to other cities like Hoboken, where you could still get decent prices on things. Even Hoboken is getting expensive, too. Then they go to Passaic [00:01:43]. You could still get good studios in other locations of New York, but they're not close to Manhattan. They're mostly in the furthest parts of Brooklyn—Jamaica, Queens.

That's what's sad, that it's a lot of artists, regardless of their race, that cannot afford. They need places to create stuff. Then artists are strange in [themselves], that each artist—it's their own attitude and their own work.

Zapol: Are you an artist?

Garcia: No, no, no, no, no, no.

Zapol: You produce—

Garcia: I'm an organizer.

Zapol: You organize artists.

Garcia: Yeah. I'm an organizer more than an artist, and I'm involved in productions and things like that, like how to finance projects. But I don't consider [myself] an artist, even though I do a lot of mosaics and things like that. I don't consider myself an artist. An artist is an artist. Sometimes people have an attitude. That's bullshit, *pero* in my lifetime, I've met real people and their work, and I consider them artists, regardless if it's entertainment, or painting, or something like that. You see the spirit in that person. You know that there's an artist. There are people that say, "Yeah, I could do that." [laughs] People say that—"I could do that if I want." [laughs] It's funny—

Zapol: People say things—

Garcia:—people have that attitude, you know what I mean. In reality, art is very important in our culture. In all cultures, not just Latino. In the culture [in] general, that's how you see great pieces coming from great people—from Europe, Eastern Europe, Russia. People usually wonder

why the Russians got so many writers. I say, “With the fucking cold weather, [laughs] who won’t be a writer, right?” [laughs]

Zapol: But it’s interesting what you say as—

Garcia: But I mean, Russia is an interesting country, right? I always respect—I’ve met a lot of Russians in the Lower East Side because at one time, the Eastern Europeans were very dominant in this area. Very dominant, the Polish, Russians, and Ukrainians, so I always became good friends of them as a kid. We became good friends as we grew up. One of them became a very great writer. Yuri Kapralov became a very famous artist. He published like five books, and he was the official translator for the Russian mafia. Every time he came from Coney Island where they’d hang out, I would always think, whoa, you came back alive! [laughs] I told him, “And they’re scared that you might rat them out because you know secrets,” and he said, “Yeah, but if they kill me,” he said, “if they kill me, then they won’t have a translator. They don’t have a translator that they trust.” He told me, “and they trust me.” [laughs] **[00:05:16]**

Zapol: Wow.

Garcia: He was a funny character, you know. But he wrote one of the books. If you’re doing this history thing, you should check it out.

Zapol: OK.

Garcia: *Once There Was A Village* is the name of the book. Check it out. They got it mostly at these bookstores down here.

Zapol: Yeah, yes, I recognize the name.

Garcia: Oh, you recognize the name?

Zapol: Yeah, yeah. Here—

Garcia: That was written by Yuri.

Zapol: OK.

Garcia: And he considers himself a Lower East Side artist.

Zapol: Mmhm.

Garcia: You know?

Zapol: Here, I'll walk you out.

Garcia: Thank you for everything. Bye bye.

Zapol: Thank you!

[END OF INTERVIEW]