

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

Oral History Interview

ROBERT SANFIZ

By Liza Zapol

New York, NY

March 28, 2016

## Oral History Interview with Robert Sanfiz, March 28, 2016

Narrator(s)	Robert Sanfiz
Birthdate	3/20/69
Birthplace	Queens, NY
Narrator Age	47
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
Place of Interview	La Nacional/ Spanish Benevolent Society
Date of Interview	3/28/16
Duration of Interview	1 hr, 45 mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photographs	Y
Format Recorded	.Wav 98 khz, 24 bit
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Order in Oral Histories	23 [#2 2016]

### Addendum:

Drilling/ construction sound for the first half hour or so.



Robert Sanfiz at La Nacional/Spanish Benevolent Society at 239 W. 14th Street, on March 28, 2016.  
Photograph by Liza Zapol.

## Quotes from Oral History Interview with Robert Sanfiz

“My father’s family was always involved in the jewelry business. My father was not the typical immigrant story. He actually did not want to come, but, you know, he had married my American mother, and Spain in the [19]60s didn’t have quite the opportunities for a young teacher that she was. So they struggled with the decision, and they came here when I was eight months in the womb. So I was basically born the month my mother got here. It was March of [19]69, and there was a historical snowstorm. I think it was John Lindsay, had gotten in big trouble, because he didn’t take care of the snow removal. And my father, that year, was so shocked, because A, he could not believe the snow; B, since we grew up on Main Street, he was so stunned about how people reacted to the Mets winning the championship right down the block at Shea Stadium, and the Jets winning a few months later. So he just was so shocked at the sports culture here. Of course I grew up to be one of the all-time great Mets fans, I must say. So yeah, it was a decision based strictly on, you know, being at a good distance from both places. I always felt very blessed to spend one summer in San Francisco, and the other would be in Spain. I always felt that those were two great places, but always being able to have New York City as my home base.”

(Sanfiz p. 3)

“I was about twenty-five, twenty-six, and we just went in. You know what’s funny, is that even though this was now the year 1996, and market values weren’t anything what they are today, but it was impossible to find an apartment in those days, too. And I mean impossible. I remember that our first choice was the East Village, because, you know, you’re twenty-six, and you want something like that. We went to go see apartments, and I just cannot believe how terrible they were. Of course we tried to justify everything: “Yeah, well, even though this window’s actually a brick wall, and there’s zero light in here, and there’s this crazy loft that we have to kind of share among like four people, let’s do it!” So we were all justifying how we were going to make our life in the East Village, and then one day we got a phone call, and they said, “Look, there’s this apartment on 13<sup>th</sup> Street and Greenwich Avenue in the West Village,” a place that we didn’t even think was in our budget. I remember, it was being shown by an agent, and we were the first person to walk in, and I remember walking in and saying, “Can we give you the check? Can we give you the check right now?” And she said, “Yes, you can give me the check, I’m still probably to show it, because it’s my obligation, but you are the first to give me the check.”

She called us up the next day and said, “The apartment’s yours.” And, I mean, it’s still my apartment, how’s that? So all these years later, I’m still there. And I remember the experiences in that apartment, you know, as a single man, my buddy and I. The whole building was full of single people, and we would all have fun, and we’d all get together, and we’d all kind of have these parties and go out, so there’s something going on. Curiously enough, very few people have ended up leaving. So all those young people have gone on to have families, and the apartment is completely different from how I remember it in [19]96. You know, now you hear kids everywhere, and the few people that move in that are single, you can tell they’re in careers where only they can afford these apartments. And it’s a different vibe, you know? It’s a different vibe. It would not really be a place where I’d want to go now as a young person, but for my needs today, thankfully, it’s changed with me. So, in that sense, I’m pretty happy.”

(Sanfiz pp. 7-8)

“So, you know, the Spanish immigrant community is very tiny. I’ve read that for every one immigrant from Spain, there was 150 from Italy. And there was 160 from Ireland. Even Portuguese outnumber us, I think five-to-one. So there’s not a lot of Spaniards. But the few that did come here, almost exclusively settled right here on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, mostly because the boats that would bring a lot of the Spanish goods and products and even people all docked right on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, on the Hudson piers. And a little neighborhood started to develop here, and in fact, unfortunately some of them have started to close very recently but I think three of the ten oldest restaurants in New York are West Village Spanish restaurants, including Sevilla; Spain Restaurant; El Faro, which just closed; El Charo Español, which just closed, all within this year; and of course La Nacional. So, you know, there’s a real old-school Spanish vibe here, and in fact, I even happen to know that a lot of the wealthiest landlords in the West Village today, thankfully mostly good ones, are old-time Spanish immigrants that had come here with nothing and in the 1940s and [19]50s they would just buy one apartment, and rent out another one, and then would buy another, and buy another, and when nobody cared about the city in the [19]70s, they were busy buying more and more apartments. So some of them have done quite well.” (Sanfiz p. 14)

“So the Society really started to explode after the war. A lot of people who had tried to escape the dictatorship, especially, had come here. I would say the apex was when we used to close the entire block, if you can imagine this. We used to have the festival of Saint James, and thinking about this in today’s Village, or today’s 14<sup>th</sup> Street, but we used to close and get the permit for one week. So it wasn’t a one-day festival; it would be an entire week festival. Where it would be open to traffic until about six, and then all the restaurants—and at the time there were eighty different Spanish establishments on this block. So between Seventh and Eighth, in the [19]50s and [19]60s and even into the [19]70s, it was eighty establishments. Basically the whole place. And when the traffic would close, just like they would in Spain, they would bring out all the seats for the restaurants and they would have outdoor dining, and they would dance flamenco or play the bagpipes like they do in the Galician region of Spain, and it would just be a full week of that. Those were the things that, you know, really made the neighborhood a special place, you know?” (Sanfiz p. 15)

“To get back a little bit to myself, every day I think about leaving. I don’t want to. My family does not want to. My kids are very used to life here. We’ve made friends. We’re very much part of our community. We’re very involved in our school at PS 3 on Hudson Street. I’m in charge of getting the venue every year for the big fundraiser. But it becomes hard. It becomes hard. And I really feel like the city is doing very, very little to keep people like me, people who love the community, people who make a good salary, a decent salary in any other place of the world except here. To feel that we scrape by month-to-month is something that we should not be feeling. So, when is the city going to recognize that? When is the city going to recognize that places like this, that are 150 years old, don’t deserve to pay 80,000 dollars a year in taxes when we’re trying to help people. You know? These are the types of things that I wish the city would take a closer look at.” (Sanfiz p. 24)

“But the first day that I had walked in, in the back of the space there was a person lying on the floor. He was contorted in a way that just did not seem normal. I thought that this guy must be incredibly drunk. I went over to him, and kind of sensed that he was not responding, and it turned out he had died. So, that was my first day in this space. What happened was that the old administration had a lot of people that would hang around, and they let some guy sleep there, and he would take four chairs, put them together—you could see the four chairs, he used as his bed. And you could see where he was, kind of sleeping on his arm, and that he was dead. I remember calling up one of the guys that was here, one of these old time Spanish guys, and he came downstairs, and in a very matter-of-factly way was like, “*Este está muerto.*” Which translates to “This guy’s dead.” A guy he had known for forty years. That’s the old school way, you know, and I remember for me it was a total shock. But for him it was just like, “Ok, come on, call the ambulance and let’s move on.” So, this was kind of what we all were up against in the very beginning. So, believe me, a lot of the change was for the better. Because that’s kind of the mentality that existed.”  
(Sanfiz pp. 25-26)

“I almost start to tear up when I tell the story, because it was really one of these moments I’ll never forget. We have a real treasure trove here. And that is: we have the membership cards of thousands, 10,000 or more, Spanish immigrants that came here. And each of those cards over the last hundred years, has an unbelievable amount of information, from their photos, to where they were born, where their parents were born. So it’s not just you found out about the first immigrant, you could find out about where they came from in Spain, when they died, where they were buried, what they did, their children. All this great information. And they’re beautiful. They’re these beautiful, old, aging cards. They look fantastic. So I knew when I made the presentation I wanted to show some of them off, and so I took a handful. Of the 10,000 or so cards I took literally a handful, about 200 of them, and I kind of thumbed through them to see the ones that just seemed most interesting, like there was one where the guy looked right out of a gangster movie, another one where there’s this really attractive woman, another one just of this young girl, and there was this one of this cute kid in a bowtie, probably was eight years old, and I used those as the four or five examples.

So, here we are, a year ago, and I’m giving the presentation, when right before the presentation a guy comes up to me. He tells me his name. And I said, “Wait.” His name was Secondino, that’s how I remember, because it was a little bit of a strange name. And I said, “Is your last name Fernandez, by any chance?” Because I started to—I was like, “Oh my god, this looks exactly like the little boy in that picture,” but he’s like seventy-five now, or eighty. And he’s like, “Yes.” I was like, “Oh my god,” and I showed him the card. He started to cry. He started to cry when he saw himself at that age, and he couldn’t believe that. And he stayed, he was at the presentation. There weren’t a lot of Spaniards, he was one of them. And when we were there, and we gave the presentation in front of the Greenwich Village Society, I said, I actually said, “Just five minutes ago, I met him.” And the people were up on their feet and clapping and it was one of those moments that you really saw the community come together in something that we can all share, and that’s like about our past and what attracts us to this place and what we still want to strive to fight for.”  
(Sanfiz pp. 31-32)

“I just wanted to tell a little bit about what the Spanish Civil War was, here in New York as well, because this community was incredibly divided. The Spanish Civil War is very unique in history, because unlike most civil wars, which are usually a fight for land or ethnic strife or religious division, or something financial, the Spanish Civil War was literally a war between conservatives and liberals. I remember being a young boy, and my father would tell me stories of the war. My father would say to me, “You know, you never know, these things could happen anywhere.” And I would laugh, I’d say, “Not here, Dad, I mean, go back to your old world ideas. “This could never happen in a place like the United States.” And he said to me, “You know, Spain, after losing the Spanish-American War in 1898, realized that here’s this great world empire that had nothing. That had nothing. So people started to point fingers. The Left said, ‘It’s your fault.’ The Right said, ‘It’s your fault,’ and this carried on for fifty years, as the decline of the empire.”

So, some of the things my father used to say, in today’s political climate, don’t seem so crazy anymore. You know? Sometimes I worry about an election gone wrong, and next thing you know they’re shooting because they’re saying, we don’t recognize it. So, anyway, the point is that there’s precedent, because it happened in Spain. And families were torn apart, ok? I’m sure you have family in your immediate family that don’t think the same way politically as you do. And that’s what would happen. So, towns were torn apart. If the soldiers from one side came in, they said, “No, those are the liberals,” or “Those are the conservatives.” It was terrible.

And here, it happened as well. So, in fact, one of the photos I showed during the presentation I’d given was Casa Moneo. It was a real institution. I mean, those were the guys—they made Little Spain, as much as we did. They were like the big store, with all the Spanish goods, and there’s several floors, run by families for generations, and it closed in like [19]92, ok? And everybody always talks about it, whenever they talk about Little Spain, the first thing they say is “Casa Moneo!”

But Casa Moneo supported the dictatorship. Ok? The dictatorship was not like what we see today. It was people who were conservatives. Spain was probably headed for a dictatorship anyway, whether the Left or the Right won. It was just a very complicated time after the Spanish Civil War. But the point is that they would be the entire community, and as you can see in this particular photo, there were people that would sit out in front saying “Do not buy fascist merchandise.” And it tore our community apart.

And Spain is still one of those few countries where you can’t really discuss politics. In this place, we don’t discuss it. And the fact that I’m an American of Spanish descent—I kind of feel a bit immune to it, but I always know it’s good practice never to bring up politics.”

(Sanfiz pp. 32-33)

## Summary of Oral History Interview with Robert Sanfiz

Robert Sanfiz was born in 1969, in Flushing, Queens, to a father from Spain and a mother from San Francisco. His parents had met in Spain while Robert's mom was traveling through Europe. They quickly fell in love, got married, and decided to move to New York because it was roughly equidistant from both Spain and California. As a child, Robert and his family would alternate their summers between these two places. Robert recalls suburban Flushing as an extremely diverse place, and is grateful for having grown up there.

Robert attended college at Binghamton University, where he studied history and served as editor-in-chief of the school newspaper. After graduating, Robert went straight into Brooklyn Law School, and after finishing there and passing the bar, took a job as an in-house lawyer with Prudential Insurance Company in Newark. Robert was living in Queens during most of this time, but in 1996 decided to move into Manhattan, and was able to find an apartment in the Village, where he still lives today with his wife and children.

Several years after his move to the Village, and three years onto his career at Prudential, Robert made the life-changing decision to quit his job and move to Spain. He stayed there for five years. He is grateful for having experienced a different lifestyle in Spain from the one he had grown accustomed to in New York. "People in Spain really put their life first," he tells the interviewer. "And, you know, maybe Spain doesn't have the economy of United States, or of Germany, but they don't want it. They don't want it, because there's this feeling like the pursuit of wealth will never give you the same quality of life."

Robert returned to New York in September 2005, and was married a month later to his wife, "a lovely Italian-American." Nine months after the marriage, his first child was born. Fortunately, Robert had been able to sublet his apartment for the entire five-year period that he spent in Spain. "I don't think my landlord would ever allow that today," he confides in the interviewer. Raising children in the Village has given Robert a new perspective on the neighborhood, and made him particularly sensitive to the at-times astronomical cost of living here.

Upon returning to the United States, Robert set himself up as a community attorney with a storefront on 14<sup>th</sup> Street. "I represent the poor people who are being sued by their landlords," he explains, "or the young person who walks in and doesn't know what to do and how to go about any legal matter at all. So I help a lot of times people who don't have any other way."

Robert now also serves as executive director of the the Spanish Benevolent Society/La Nacional, a 150-year-old cultural organization, also located on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, where this interview takes place. Robert first became involved with La Nacional when it was on the brink of folding several years ago; his law office provided about 400 hours of pro bono work to help the Society stay afloat and begin rebuilding its presence. As with private residents, the Society has had to deal with the challenges of affording life in the Village, particularly as it receives daily calls from real estate developers offering millions of dollars to buy the building immediately. But Robert and the rest of his colleagues at the Society are committed to keeping the building, for the sake of the community. Robert speaks at great length about the efforts that the Society is making

in this vein, such as the renovation of its downstairs Spanish restaurant, and its practice of hosting cultural programming about nine out of ten given nights.

Much of this interview is focused on the history of the Spanish immigrant community in New York, and on the history and particularities of La Nacional, a truly historic institution of Greenwich Village.

#### General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an Oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP West 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 South 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 Liza Zapol for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. It's March 28, 2016, and I'm here at La Nacional, the Spanish Benevolent Society headquarters, and if I can ask you to introduce yourself, please.

**Sanfiz:** Ok, my name is Robert Sanfiz. I am the Executive Director of La Nacional, the Spanish Benevolent Society. I am also an attorney who has a storefront right here on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, so I feel very connected to the community. I live around the corner on 13<sup>th</sup> Street.

**Zapol:** Great. So if we can start kind of going way back—

**Sanfiz:** Sure.

**Zapol:** If you can tell me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your early childhood.

**Sanfiz:** Ok, so I was born in 1969 in Flushing Hospital, on Main Street. Grew up very proud of my roots in Queens, in the type of block where we probably had fifty or sixty kids playing out on the street at any given moment. You know, Manhattan to me was this place where my father worked. My father worked in the jewelry district, he came over from Spain, he married my American mother. My mother is from San Francisco, and was actually in Berkeley in the [19]60s. She was a teacher for the military stationed in Germany at the time, and she went to take a three-day trip to Madrid, Spain, which is a very different Spain than it is today, under the dictatorship of Franco, and she met my father in kind of an underground cave where people used to hang out, and the dictatorship let them be. And met my father, without speaking a word of English. I mean, my father not a word of English and my mother not a word of Spanish, and somehow he managed to have her stick around for another week after her friends went home.

So, the point is they got married, almost immediately, and they decided to settle in New York, because it was six hours between Spain and San Francisco, and that's how they made the decision. And my mother decided on Flushing because in [19]64 she remembers the World's Fair that she had gone to, and had such a good time, that the first place, the only place she ever really knew was Flushing. She went from LaGuardia Airport to Flushing, and she said, "Let's go there." And that's where they decided to raise us. Originally on Main Street in Flushing, which

has changed a lot. At that time it was actually a house, if you can believe that. Since then we moved up closer to where Whitestone and Flushing meet.

It was a very nice childhood, you know? It was really great having kids that we could play with at all times, and all the yards were open, and we could play out in the street and not have to worry about cars hitting us. That was quite nice. So when I did come into the city, of course, the city was this magical place. My father working on 47<sup>th</sup> Street, the jewelry district especially, in the [19]80s, it's not quite the same today, but in the [19]70s and [19]80s that was the center of the world for the jewelry market. I mean, Wall Street has nothing on the jewelry district. Because the jewelry district is a lot more about—it's just a crazy place, you know? It's the only place in the world where you could theoretically hide five million dollars of merchandise in the size of your thumb, so it always had some unsavory characters. I remember my father, who was a good, honest man, would come home with all these stories.

But I would probably go down and work with him in the summers, every so often, and he would always take the Queensboro Bridge and when we crossed into Manhattan there was just that magical feeling. Even though it didn't happen often, and he would park right there on 47<sup>th</sup> Street, of course not quite as expensive as it is today. You know, I always loved Manhattan, I always did..

**Zapol:** Tell me a little bit more about your father. What was he doing in that cave in Spain—

**Sanfiz:** Yes!

**Zapol:** —where he met your mother, and how did he end up in the jewelry business?

**Sanfiz:** It's actually called *Cuevas Sésamo*, and it still exists. Madrid, it could be very hot, so one of the ways they used to construct it back in the 1500s, was they used to use the actual stone itself sometimes. So they're called caves. It doesn't really feel so much like a cave when you walk in, but it helps with temperature and stuff.

So my father was a regular there, and he always told this story of the particular day when my mother was there. He would go all the time, but this one day that there was—he said he was only going to stop if there was parking, which was never easy in that part of Madrid. He always

says how at the very last second, on the very end of the block, somebody had moved out, and he went in and met my mother. [00:05:10]

I went to go live in Spain for five years. It had always called to me. I always knew at some point I wanted to go there. I had gone there occasionally when I was young, and always had such a good time, that at one point I knew I wanted to go. My parents had come to visit me, and we actually went back to that cave, where they met, and there were still some of the old men working there that knew my father, and kind of laughed. They were like, “You married that American?!” He was like, “Yeah, and here’s my three kids.”

So, you know, my father’s family was always involved in the jewelry business. My father was not the typical immigrant story. He actually did not want to come, but, you know, he had married my American mother, and Spain in the [19]60s didn’t have quite the opportunities for a young teacher that she was. So they struggled with the decision, and they came here when I was eight months in the womb. So I was basically born the month my mother got here. It was March of [19]69, and there was a historical snowstorm. I think it was John Lindsay, had gotten in big trouble, because he didn’t take care of the snow removal. And my father, that year, was so shocked, because A, he could not believe the snow; B, since we grew up on Main Street, he was so stunned about how people reacted to the Mets winning the championship right down the block at Shea Stadium, and the Jets winning a few months later. So he just was so shocked at the sports culture here. Of course I grew up to be one of the all-time great Mets fans, I must say. So yeah, it was a decision based strictly on, you know, being at a good distance from both places. I always felt very blessed to spend one summer in San Francisco, and the other would be in Spain. I always felt that those were two great places, but always being able to have New York City as my home base.

**Zapol:** What language did you speak at home? What was your understanding of Spanish culture? How was it a part of your home life, if at all?

**Sanfiz:** It was a different time, you know. My father was kind of the typical—you hear about the stories, especially of the European immigration that would come in and they would leave the language at home. My father, even though Spanish was such an important language, he didn’t really stress it probably the way he should have, and regretted it later. Now thankfully, because

my father didn't speak English very well, when I was young—not my brothers, but since I'm the firstborn—I heard it a lot. And for that reason my accent is pretty good. You know, for the most part.

But I probably picked up Spanish—in school I remember taking a class, I was not particularly good at it, but I went to go live in Spain in my very late twenties, and I came back. Now I know it perfectly, or else I wouldn't be here at this job. But, yeah, he did not stress the language, and of course now people are. But being a Spaniard, of Spanish descent, is kind of funny. Back then—nowadays it's different, not entirely, but it's different—when you said you're Spanish, I could probably tell you a thousand times, and I'm not kidding, that people would say, “Spanish? You don't look Spanish.” And I would respond by saying, “I actually look pretty stereotypically Spanish,” and they'd say, “Wow, you look like you could be English or Italian or French.” And I would say, “Yeah, well, you know, they are next door neighbors.”

That said, I always felt very lucky in some ways, because on one hand, whenever I was in school, growing up in Flushing, Queens, which was so unbelievably ethnically mixed, and wonderfully so—I mean that's one of the things I most appreciated about my upbringing, I was always felt down with every group, you know what I mean, because even though I'm white, just the fact that my name is Spanish and the fact that I could get by speaking Spanish, always put me okay with all groups. And that's how Queens is, you know. Everyone gets along, for the most part, but the more people you could connect with, always better. So I really enjoyed that part, and I remember going to Spain as a young child, and the thing that would freak me out the most is when I'd walk down the street and only see white people. And I remember thinking, this is very strange, and almost uncomfortable, you know? So, it's one of the really nice experiences of growing up in Queens. Even the West Village now can't come close to having that feeling like I had in Queens. [00:09:55]

And my mother became a public school teacher. Her particular district was the most ethnically diverse district there was, and they had to have report cards in a hundred and twelve languages. So that really gives you an idea of what it was like. And you know, and the same thing on my block, where it started out as a typical Irish-Italian neighborhood. Over time it became more mixed, especially with Asians, and we always liked that, too.

**Zapol:** And who are some of your close friends growing up? If you can tell me a little bit about, you know, you said, “I kind of got along with everybody, and that was good. They were cool with me, and I was cool with them.”

**Sanfiz:** Right, so, you know, at the lunch table—it was different times, there was not the political correctness that is now today, where everyone’s a little more careful. I remember people not being like that. I remember, you know, if I was Spanish, whether I looked it or not, or whether I spoke it or not, I would be the spic. But it wasn’t bad! People weren’t there to hurt you, it was just the way it is, you know, and we did it right back, and it was never with malintent, it was just the way it was.

But in some ways—we all laugh about it now, and certainly we don’t carry on that way anymore. But, in some ways, because we were all so mixed, and all of us there in school under such an environment, a lot of the prejudices were kind of stripped away because we all knew each other so well. And there were so many others of your type there, so that part was great. Yeah, so my friends have always been very mixed. Even my family, my one brother is married to an Ecuadorian, another one is married to a woman from Uganda. I, curiously enough, who have probably dated every race and nationality under the book, ended up marrying a beautiful girl of Italian descent from Queens. So I came full circle. I think one of the worries for me, now that I have three children of my own, was that I always thought that the way I was raised was the best way, you know. Because it was kind of in the city, but not. You’re certainly able to say that you’re from the city. Other people from New York would be like, “No, you’re from Queens,” but when I traveled to Spain or anywhere else I was still technically from the city.

But, you know, I kind of worried for my own kids, that they would not have that experience here. They would not just be able to walk out in the front. And that’s still something that I think about. We do have great parks, and we do have places that my kids are stimulated intellectually in ways that I certainly wasn’t. I always tell the story: I ended up going to the State University at Binghamton, which was a great school. We all kind of joke around that we all got into the Ivy Leagues but we couldn’t afford it. There was always this hierarchy of, like, street smart. It would always start off with the kids that were not from New York State first, they were out, and they just had no clue. And then it would be the New York State kids, especially like the Buffalo kids, or Syracuse kids. And then it would be the Westchester kids, Staten Island and

Long Island kids. And then it would be the borough kids, and then it would be the Manhattan kids. The Manhattan kids were just on a whole different level. Just something about them, they always just had an edge, you know? Curiously enough, I kind of think now that the edge is back out in the suburbs, and that the kids are now raised in a kind of perfect little environment here, where, you know, god forbid there's bullying or anything like that, which is great. Which is certainly great. But my kids, I don't think, could ever experience what it was like to sometimes be in rough streets. When I would play around the corner in the park, we knew that there were certain kids you could not mess with. And if you did, there would be serious repercussions. And, if we played handball and the ball went on their side, it's theirs. That's just the rule. Don't even bother coming over to ask for it. Then there were the train tracks, the Long Island Railroad train tracks, and there was the other side of the train tracks, where you had to be careful. That was just the way it was. There were street rules. My kids have no idea what those rules about today. And it's probably better that way.

**Zapol:** It's interesting, you're talking about sort the edges of community, and it'll be interesting to talk about that again, when we come back to this neighborhood.

So tell me, you went to Binghamton, to SUNY Binghamton, and then what were you studying there, what were you focusing on?

**Sanfiz:** I was a history major, which is kind of one of those useless majors, but I think what I did most—I became the editor-in-chief of the school newspaper. It just fell on me, one day somebody asked if I wanted to write a sports article, next thing you know, they had an opening in the sports section. I didn't even think I wanted to be sports editor, and then there was a crisis at the newspaper where the editor-in-chief had gotten sick, and a lot of people had come up to me and said, "Look, Rob, we need somebody who's gonna take her place, you know, someone who we think would be just a decent and fair person." I remember really not wanting the job, and I started to worry that the paper, this fifty-year-old newspaper, would come apart. I just kind of said, "Okay," and, "I'll do it." So that became the big part of my life. [00:15:30]

I kind of thought that I would go into career journalism, but when I was writing editorials at four o'clock in the morning, when the paper had to be ready by eight, I remember thinking "This is not for me." This is not for me, because, you know, an editorial, every word is

important, and you're the voice of the paper. When I was writing when I had no inspiration to write, and I had to, is when I said, you know, "This is not for me."

So, instead, I did something else. I'm not sure how much I love that aspect of my career, but I went to law school. When you were a child or a student in the late [19]80s or early [19]90s, law school was an option for just about everyone. It was like anybody was just like, "Let's go to law school." I got a scholarship to go to Brooklyn Law, and that's probably the only reason I ended up going. It wasn't going to cost me too much. My three years of law school, actually, looking back, were kind of a haze. I remember probably making a mistake of going directly to law school from college, because you're still in that mindset of, you know, having a good time. And I was a commuter. But that said, you know, I went, and I passed the bar exam, and I worked for Prudential insurance, in Newark. I was taking the Long Island Railroad to the PATH train sometimes, and it was just a very long commute. A really close buddy of mine from college, Josh Kranz, who had lived with me at various times and in different places in Queens, said, "Let's go live in the city. I think we're ready."

I was about twenty-five, twenty-six, and we just went in. You know what's funny, is that even though this was now the year 1996, and market values weren't anything what they are today, but it was impossible to find an apartment in those days, too. And I mean impossible. I remember that our first choice was the East Village, because, you know, you're twenty-six, and you want something like that. We went to go see apartments, and I just cannot believe how terrible they were. Of course we tried to justify everything: "Yeah, well, even though this window's actually a brick wall, and there's zero light in here, and there's this crazy loft that we have to kind of share among like four people, let's do it!" So we were all justifying how we were going to make our life in the East Village, and then one day we got a phone call, and they said, "Look, there's this apartment on 13<sup>th</sup> Street and Greenwich Avenue in the West Village," a place that we didn't even think was in our budget. I remember, it was being shown by an agent, and we were the first person to walk in, and I remember walking in and saying, "Can we give you the check? Can we give you the check right now?" And she said, "Yes, you can give me the check, I'm still probably to show it, because it's my obligation, but you are the first to give me the check."

She called us up the next day and said, “The apartment’s yours.” And, I mean, it’s still my apartment, how’s that? So all these years later, I’m still there. And I remember the experiences in that apartment, you know, as a single man, my buddy and I. The whole building was full of single people, and we would all have fun, and we’d all get together, and we’d all kind of have these parties and go out, so there’s something going on. Curiously enough, very few people have ended up leaving. So all those young people have gone on to have families, and the apartment is completely different from how I remember it in [19]96. You know, now you hear kids everywhere, and the few people that move in that are single, you can tell they’re in careers where only they can afford these apartments. And it’s a different vibe, you know? It’s a different vibe. It would not really be a place where I’d want to go now as a young person, but for my needs today, thankfully, it’s changed with me. So, in that sense, I’m pretty happy.

**Zapol:** Can you describe more what that location at 13<sup>th</sup> Street and Greenwich was like in [19]96? What was around you? Who were the other people who were in the apartment at that time?

**Sanfiz:** I remember the owner of Hogs and Heifers lived on our floor, for example. I remember going there sometimes and feeling a little bit special because it was some, you know, middle-aged woman, one of those cool girls who when you’re twenty-six and she’s forty-six seem like—and we would go to the Red Rock Inn. There would be all these nice places in the Meatpacking District. I’m sure you guys hear these stories all the time, but in [19]96—this is not ancient history—to think about how unbelievably different those, just one block away from where I was was. It was just incredible. You know, I’m one of those types, there’s a lot of differing opinions, and believe me, as the executive director of a 150 year old Society, I very much believe in the preservation of the Village and what we once knew. That said, there are times that I realize how dangerous, sometimes, the West Village was. And how dangerous the Meatpacking District was. You know, that part I don’t miss, at all. At all. [00:20:48]

I remember the triangle building, I guess you’d call it, the one that’s across from the Apple store. I remember that place just having red lights everywhere, for a variety of prostitutes, sexual underground clubs. It was just a very gritty place. You know, I would say today, I’m not always comfortable with the changes either. The fact that Hogs and Heifers closed, for example, to me, is one of those—I mean, when you have such a cool place right in the middle of what is a

very fancy neighborhood, it actually makes the neighborhood better. You know? Even when the tourists come by and say, “Look at this, and look at that Standard hotel across the street,” that’s what makes it cool. The fact that those things are disappearing is a cause of great alarm.

You know, I have other issues with the Village today. I don’t know whether you want to get into that now, should we just progress into that or we’ll do it later?

**Zapol:** You know, maybe, as we’re talking about, [19]96, when you got here, maybe we can keep talking from that perspective—

**Sanfiz:** More—

**Zapol:** Yeah.

**Sanfiz:** —about how it was.

**Zapol:** Yeah.

**Sanfiz:** Even 14<sup>th</sup> Street, you know. We would go over to Nell’s sometimes, you remember Nell’s? Nell’s was right here, across the street, and I remember one time Prince played there. And thinking like, “Wow, you know, this is still a—” It was still a really fun place, and unpredictable. But you know, you walk right out of it, and it was not safe. 14<sup>th</sup> Street was really, really unsafe. 14<sup>th</sup> Street even today is still a very mixed bag. I happen to love 14<sup>th</sup> Street, and 14<sup>th</sup> Street’s pretty famous in the sense that is it Manhattan’s longest street. So that part is really fun. And for me, in [19]96, I had not yet gone to Spain, but I did know a little bit about the Spanish legacy right here, in the neighborhood.

I remember this building was here, La Nacional, and it connected to me personally in one way. And most people who were young wanted nothing to do with this place. It had gone through a very serious state of decline. But I had a particular story that connected it to me back in [19]88. I had an uncle who had come here from Spain, he had a job working for The Wiz, as an accountant. We would laugh at the commercials and we would say, “That’s the company you work for!” He was the loveliest person, and he had a stroke and he died while he was here, and it was a great shock to us. We didn’t think that anyone knew him, and they had the wake at Redden’s, which is right down the block, you know, on 14<sup>th</sup> Street. I remember coming from

Binghamton for it, and we were all really sad thinking it was just going to be like my immediate family and that's it, and meanwhile it must have been 200 people that showed up from this society that all knew him because he also did the accounting work for this society. I remember thinking—You know, I didn't really know people from Spain growing up. That's what's also shocking. So here I am, a person of Spanish descent, and I did not know Spaniards at all. And suddenly seeing, like, 200 people, and they all had the same experiences that I did growing up, where, you know, not really people understood where were from, and that was really eye-opening.

Anyway, so after settling into the Village, by the year 1999, I had an opportunity to leave to Spain, and it was for a business reason, and it was one of those real soul-searching moments. Because I was pretty happy with my job in Prudential, I was in-house attorney. I remember I was twenty-nine at the time, and saying, "Look, what are you going to do, this is maybe going to be your one last chance to do something like this." And I left. I remember giving notice, and I remember them being shocked, and I remember saying, "You know, I'm going to go to Spain." And I thank God. It was one of those decisions that I was really happy about, because it introduced me to a very different way of life. So I left my apartment, but I was able to sublease it during those years. It wasn't nearly as cut-throat as today. I don't think my landlord would ever allow that today. But he did in those years. [00:25:24]

So I was really introduced to a different way of thinking, a different way of approaching life. Very, very happy about that. People in Spain really put their life first. And, you know, maybe Spain doesn't have the economy of United States, or of Germany, but they don't want it. They don't want it, because there's this feeling like the pursuit of wealth will never give you the same quality of life, that you have to make a decision. And Spain, because it has such great weather—it's got everything that all the other European countries have. It's got all the culture, and all the food, but it's got one thing that they don't, and that is really great weather. And when you have really great weather, there's a different culture. There's a reason why Spain is known to be a really fun country, because, you know, every town has its festival because it can. Because you know it's going to be really great weather, and it has been for the last thousand years, and is going to be for the next, hopefully. I was always very shocked at how there would come a certain hour of the night, around seven—of course, in Spain, it gets darker later, like by ten o'clock it

was getting dark in the summer. So by seven, as the sun would go down—because there’s a reason why Spain has siestas. People are like, “Oh, what, are people lazy?” I’m like, “No, it’s because they’ve been doing this for thousands of years, and if you are out in Spain between the hours of two and four, you’re not going to be productive.” But by seven o’clock, when work was letting out, everyone would go out in the streets and would dress up and would take walks. That really shocked me. It would be these old people, eighty-eight years old, they would come up, they’d put their tie on, the lady would wear their dresses, and they would just walk out and say hello to everybody, and it was a daily ritual. In Spain they don’t have a very high birth rate, but if there would be that one grandchild, I remember, you’d go to the plazas, and the whole family would just be fawning over the one child. I just remember thinking—and it was very nocturnal, too, and that part was just like New York. I always liked that, I said, “Now, I understand, this is why I must be from here.” Because, you know, the fact that I could call my aunt as long as it’s before two AM, and I am not kidding: it’s perfectly allowable for me to call her at one AM. [Zapol laughs] No problems whatsoever. Even today, I still know there’s no problem. In fact, the news, what we would know as the eleven o’clock news is two AM in Spain. It gets good ratings. Also, the fact that the hardest time—we spent some time in Ibiza, Spain, that’s a whole other level, and you could not get a reservation for a restaurant if it’s before eleven. So between eleven and twelve was when it would be really packed, and the clubs out in Ibiza, which were like airport hangars, you could go in before three AM, but that would be the early bird special, three AM, so when it would get packed would be between three and seven. So anyway, I think that part has always connected me to my Spain and New York life.

Curiously enough, of course, I was there during the Gulf War. I mean, the war with Iraq, and it was a very complicated time to be an American. So, it was funny, because at the time, the Spanish government also supported the war. It was Spain, England, and United States were all supporting the war, but I remember, I would go to parties, and I guess what would happen is people would hear my accent. There would be people who would right away be like, “Ugh, and the war?” And I would say, “I don’t agree with the war either,” I said, “but, you know, I don’t make the decisions.” I said, “Your country also happens to be supporting the war, am I blaming you?” So it was a testy time. A very testy time. There would be downright anti-American, anti-war protests, but a lot of it was focused on the American push for the war. And it was complicated. That was complicated.

But, you know, I spent a very nice five years in Spain, until I had come back and my apartment, thankfully, was still waiting for me. I had come back with a very different reason: I had my lovely aforementioned Italian-American wife, who was waiting for me, and I had asked her to get married. Basically, I came back in, let's see, it was September 2005, and I got married in October 2005. Back in my apartment. So, one month between Spain and marriage and life again in New York City, and just about nine months after the marriage came my first child. So, already right away raising kids in the Village. [00:30:20]

**Zapol:** In Spain it sounds like you were living in several different places. Is that right?

**Sanfiz:** I was.

**Zapol:** Yeah.

**Sanfiz:** I started mostly in Madrid, but I spent a very good time in Barcelona, and a town called Zaragoza. Then my headquarters was a place called Alcalá de Henares, which is the birthplace of Cervantes. It's a very beautiful—that's exactly where I wanted to live. I didn't really want Madrid or Barcelona, because that's more New York. I wanted a place where you saw history come alive, and where I got to live—in a fourteenth century, beautiful old building and on a pedestrian-only balconied street, right off the central plaza—and that's exactly what I wanted. It was also very close to the airport. I'd come home to New York a lot. So you know, it was a really ideal situation.

And of course for me it brought me much closer to the Spanish community. So, when I was in New York again, and I had just had my child, I had set up a small office on 80 Eighth Avenue, which is the corner of Eighth Avenue and 14<sup>th</sup> Street. The large building that's there where the HSBC bank is. I was on the eleventh floor, and just starting my law practice. I was doing a lot of work for Spanish companies, actually. I still knew La Nacional existed, that the Spanish Benevolent Society was there. Even though I had that very positive experience, I remember walking in once, a few years earlier; I describe it like those Wild West saloon scenes where you open up the doors, and everyone pops up from their cards and gives you a look like "What are you doing here?" Because it was just not a place for any person that was under the age of forty. And in the Spanish community, especially among the youth, it had a terrible reputation. The Society had gone through a major state of decline.

So I guess we'll get into that in a moment, but it was a day that I'll remember very clearly. The owner of the restaurant, Lolo Manso, who has gone on to open up a restaurant empire, he came in here as a typical immigrant, and this Society offered him the lease downstairs in the restaurant, when it was going through this period where the Society looked like it could close. He had come knocking on my door, and gave me this whole great speech on how we have to save this, and I remember falling for it hook, line, and sinker. And I remember finding out later, of course, that they had gone to all the big Spanish firms, and they all passed on it, and I ended up donating about 400 hours pro bono to helping to keep it open. And thankfully, you know, it's still here.

**Zapol:** So, what does that mean? What were those 400 hours spent doing, and what was—

**Sanfiz:** Well, a lot of it was organizing the Spaniards who were part of this place and, for a variety of reasons, did not have a say. It looked like the people who were running it had kind of different intentions, where it would have kind of lead to the eventual closure of the Society. I'm trying to be careful with exactly how I word it, but, thankfully, in the end we've put all things in the past, and thankfully even some of the people who we basically sued to stop them from closing the Society are now actually our friends.

I kind of describe it that my heart is Spanish but my head is definitely way more American. So I always try to look for practical reasons to move forward and to let whatever bad things happened in the past remain there, and to try to really work hard on getting along. So, you know, even the ex-President who we sued. I am not kidding you, he's back in Spain now, he came here, through these doors, three days ago, and just donated 1,200 dollars to the renovation of the restaurant downstairs. So, goes to show you how things can really heal, if you treat people with respect, and I'm glad it has. [00:34:53]

So, you know, to get a little bit into what had happened at the time, it was after we came to this agreement, legally, the Society still had very little people. We're talking about a Society that at one point had, in the [19]50s, 8,000 members, was down to a handful. And the process began on how could we bring people back into the fold. So I guess before I go into that, I'll tell you a little bit of what I understand of the history of Little Spain, and why and how we are here.

**Zapol:** Great, that sounds great.

**Sanfiz:** Does that sound like a good segue?

**Zapol:** I think so, absolutely, and I think you can take your time with telling that story, too.

**Sanfiz:** Ok. So, you know, the Spanish immigrant community is very tiny. I've read that for every one immigrant from Spain, there was 150 from Italy. And there was 160 from Ireland. Even Portuguese outnumber us, I think five-to-one. So there's not a lot of Spaniards. But the few that did come here, almost exclusively settled right here on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, mostly because the boats that would bring a lot of the Spanish goods and products and even people all docked right on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, on the Hudson piers. And a little neighborhood started to develop here, and in fact, unfortunately some of them have started to close very recently but I think three of the ten oldest restaurants in New York are West Village Spanish restaurants, including Sevilla; Spain Restaurant; El Faro, which just closed; El Charo Español, which just closed, all within this year; and of course La Nacional. So, you know, there's a real old-school Spanish vibe here, and in fact, I even happen to know that a lot of the wealthiest landlords in the West Village today, thankfully mostly good ones, are old-time Spanish immigrants that had come here with nothing and in the 1940s and [19]50s they would just buy one apartment, and rent out another one, and then would buy another, and buy another, and when nobody cared about the city in the [19]70s, they were busy buying more and more apartments. So some of them have done quite well.

So, this particular block was really the epicenter. I'm talking 14<sup>th</sup> Street between Seventh and Eighth was a place where, in the heyday of the Spanish immigrant community—which was probably after the Spanish Civil War, so we're talking about the 1940s, and of course after World War II, when America was booming—it was a great time here. So that's when we had 8,000 members. We had the President of Iberia, for example, and its pilots would all be members. So the whole Society would charter six airplanes, 747's, and bring all the members back to Spain to spend the month of August, which is the month that everyone takes their vacation. We have lots of photos of how things were in those days. In some ways we look back and we realize that we could never, ever capture that again. Because it was just a very special time, because everybody lived here. Now, nobody does.

So, our history here on the block was that we had moved here in 1920. So the first eighty years of the Society were down on the Lower East Side, where there was also a little

neighborhood of Spaniards, and a lot of other immigrant groups. And then, the President at the time was a man named José Comprubi, who went on to also found *El Diaro La Prensa*, which is today the largest Spanish-language newspaper. He used that newspaper as a call to the Spanish community to buy and renovate this building on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, where this new neighborhood with all the Spaniards was starting to develop. So we bought the building in 1920, and from there, we were known as La Nacional and the reason why is, Spain is a kind of complicated country: it doesn't really think so much as a country, so people are much more loyal to their region first, and their country second. So most of the clubs here—and there was ten, there would be like the Basque club, and the Zaragozana, the little Madrid, so, you know, there was all these different regions that had their clubs. But we were known as La Nacional, which would roughly translate into, you know, the National, so it was for everybody. So that kind of set us apart. It was a way of no matter who you were, where you were, what region of Spain, you could come here. [00:40:13]

So the Society really started to explode after the war. A lot of people who had tried to escape the dictatorship, especially, had come here. I would say the apex was when we used to close the entire block, if you can imagine this. We used to have the festival of Saint James, and thinking about this in today's Village, or today's 14<sup>th</sup> Street, but we used to close and get the permit for one week. So it wasn't a one-day festival; it would be an entire week festival. Where it would be open to traffic until about six, and then all the restaurants—and at the time there were eighty different Spanish establishments on this block. So between Seventh and Eighth, in the [19]50s and [19]60s and even into the [19]70s, it was eighty establishments. Basically the whole place. And when the traffic would close, just like they would in Spain, they would bring out all the seats for the restaurants and they would have outdoor dining, and they would dance flamenco or play the bagpipes like they do in the Galician region of Spain, and it would just be a full week of that. Those were the things that, you know, really made the neighborhood a special place, you know?

Unfortunately, in the [19]70s, as the rest of the city began to decline, there was the flight of the Spanish community, and everybody started to leave. You know, 14<sup>th</sup> Street really was hit hard. We have a great story, though, and I'll retell it because they're doing a documentary now about the history of the Society for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but I always loved this one story in

particular. In the blackout of 1977, as we know, the city was devastated. There's a couple people, old timers, that were still young men in those days. We remember that there was this call to come and protect the block, because what was happening was crazy. So as they tell it, they would have this group of like sixty or seventy Spaniards that were there on the block, making sure that no one touched the stores on this block. And they didn't. So, while, even up on Sixth Avenue, there were fires set to buildings; on this particular block, between Seventh and Eighth, everything was pristine. Nothing happened. So that gives you this little sense of what a community once was like. But of course that only could last so long, and by the time the late [19]70s and [19]80s hit, the people who were mainstays here either started to die out, or they moved. And especially the families all started to move out. So a Society that was once thriving, just every year, as we saw all the stores around us close—there was the Spanish bookstore, that was the last other establishment to close, it was the only bookstore that had only Spanish-language books, and that closed about ten years ago, Macondo. Even the church, Guadalupe, was decommissioned, and moved up the block. Our movie is actually called *Sole Survivor* because we were it. We were the last little kind of footprint of what was once this great neighborhood. Of course, then, even when our membership had just dwindled down and it had lost interest, completely disconnected with anyone who was young, this place came very close to its demise as well. But, in some ways, we can also thank the fact that the neighborhood has changed so much, so in many ways we've come storming back. We'll never be what we were. We'll never be that traditional membership club. That's gone, it's gone forever.

But, we are a cultural center now, and Spain and the vision of Spain has changed a lot since the 1970s. Now a lot more people know what Spain is, and they especially know it for its cutting-edge cuisine, and avant-garde sense of style. So our Society has started to reap a lot of benefits that way. And it's come storming back. Now we have cultural events here I would say ninety percent of our nights. The restaurant downstairs, which would be one of the oldest in New York City if it wasn't closed to the public; it was a members-only restaurant until about the 1990s. And in the [19]90s, when the Society was really doing terribly, everyone was eating for free, so the restaurant was just dying off. So the administration had decided instead, for the first time in its history, to rent it out. There was a series of different owners until finally Lolo, who I mentioned before, had come in fourteen years ago. He came in with all this great enthusiasm, and like a year after he opened, Frank Bruni of the *New York Times* wrote this incredible review

about his paella, and all of a sudden we were on the culinary map. And there were a lot of people who were coming here, and the restaurant went through a good period, and Lolo went on to open up four other restaurants. [00:46:56]

I think he always knew that there would come a time that things would change and the Society would have—you know, it's not always going to be meant for one owner, that there would be other people interested, and one immigrant becomes successful, it's time for the next. So, we awarded Lolo a five-year lease five years ago, as kind of a thank-you, and we, as a relatively new administration at the time, thought it was the best thing to do to have some continuity. But that it would end after five years. The idea was, and it was certainly not the easy decision—the easy decision would have just been to rent it out again to the highest bidder, but I especially deeply believe in my connection to this community, and while I mentioned that there's some good things about how the neighborhood has changed, it has not become a place for anyone who's not wealthy anymore. It just hasn't. Middle class families like my own, you know—I work for a non-profit and I'm a community attorney. People see “attorney,” like, no, I'm a community attorney. I represent the poor people who are being sued by their landlords, or the young person who walks in and doesn't know what to do and how to go about any legal matter at all. So I help a lot of times people who don't have any other way.

And, I mean, I help this Society. That probably gives you an idea, but it's unfortunate because trying to raise three kids here now is not easy at all, and we found last week Associated Supermarket up the block is closing, and now where do we buy everything? Across the street at the Yoga Institute, which we love, at least they're independently owned, but I took a picture the other day of a pint of strawberries that was fifteen dollars and ninety-eight cents. A pint of organic strawberries. I sent it to my wife and I said, “How do we continue to feed our children?” So, I think that the idea was that we were really going to create a community restaurant. A restaurant that belongs to all of us, and not just the Spanish community, because if we relied only on Spaniards, we'd be in trouble, but Spanish speakers and the local community.

In fact, I will tell you, when this Society came very close to closing eight years ago, my role started to shift. It was getting into so many complicated non-profit issues that we actually had to go pay for an expert. My role started to shift and I started to become more of a fundraiser, and the organizer, to make sure that we could continue to pay the high-priced lawyer. I

remember that the people who were most worried about us closing, in some ways weren't really only the Spaniards. It was the locals. The locals were really fearful about this, you know, 150-year-old Society that—we were not well known, we never are, a lot of people don't even know we exist. I think that's starting to change, but it was kind of insular. But people did know about the restaurant, and people really liked it, and they did not want this place to close, and they really stepped up.

So, here we are, making this decision. Again, not the easy one; the easy one would just be to rent it out to the highest bidder, but we really want to create a special place downstairs. It requires a total renovation, and as a benevolent society, we've never rolled in the money. We don't, so instead of renting out our bedrooms upstairs for the 6,000 dollars a month that we can get, we save it, and we leave it for people thirty days. An immigrant might come here from whatever country, and they're trying to get on their feet—it's not the same Spanish immigrants that used to come, they would come on a thirty-day trip, and they would know they were living here. Now half of these kids are architects, and designers, and accountants, and they're really prepared, but, you know, the opportunities in Spain, especially recently, there was a crisis which they're starting to come out of again. [00:50:11]

But, so, we would get a lot of incredibly skilled kids here, and a lot of them contribute here. We've got a staff of probably forty volunteers. All of them are really involved, and do so much. Because we're benevolent in nature, and because we give out our space for free downstairs for cultural events, and community events all the time—I mean, I can't tell you how many fundraisers we hold for schools and how many theatrical productions for plays where they couldn't find any other place, and of course the art shows, where people donate a piece of work instead of money. And that's great, and we love that it's fulfilling the mission, but we are trying to do something downstairs now that actually requires a lot of money. And as the person who runs the finances here, and runs it always quite conservatively, for the first time ever, we are, having to rely on debt, and having to rely on the community to come. You know, we set up a crowd-funding campaign, and thankfully a lot of people are stepping up now, so hopefully we'll be able to pay for the renovations downstairs.

So, we are working with some of the top culinary schools in Spain. We are going to sponsor the visas of these young, twenty-something-year-old chefs, who will come here. They'll

live in our building for free, they will have total creative license downstairs in the kitchen, and we are actually going to reduce prices, so that people can have really quality cuisine at the right price. And because we're a non-profit, and because we own the building, we don't have that same type of stress. We don't have to make a million bucks in the restaurant, you know, as long as we are fulfilling our purpose, and that is the promotion of all things Spain. In this case the cuisine, which is just as important as any. Then we're doing what we're supposed to do. So, it'll never be about the money.

**Zapol:** But it sounds like your hope is that, in investing in it at this point, that it will also be able to support the Society in some way.

**Sanfiz:** Well, that's right. What we do also recognize is that even I work here on a stipend that you wouldn't believe. Most of the other people are volunteers. We do realize that at some point, if we want the Society to last another 150 years, there's going to have to be inherent structural changes to the Society. And I think one of the ways we get there is by having a successful restaurant. I've gone to visit a lot of the other cultural societies: the French, the Japan Society, that's run like a Fortune 500 corporation, I've never seen anything like it. Very different from ours. But ours does have something. I went to visit the Ukraine Society, which is located in that unbelievably gorgeous mansion across the street from the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue. I walked in there, I just couldn't even believe that this is where—but even they told me, “Yeah, it's like a museum, people pay five dollars to come and look around our building,” he goes, “but it's kind of dead.” But our Society truly reflects the Spanish culture itself, and it's a fun place to be, and there's a lot of action, and we are located in a neighborhood that probably reflects Spanish culture more than any. I'm very glad that we don't have some Fifth Avenue mansion. I could not be more happy to be here. And the fact now that we're going to have a restaurant in this really cutting edge neighborhood is really going to, hopefully, be a turning point.

And then at some point we have to acknowledge that we don't have the membership base that we used to, so while we might be thriving as a Society again for cultural reasons, we're never really going to have that membership club, so what are we going to do, what structural changes are we going to do in the future to ensure that there's never another crisis that could result in the closure? Those are things that we're starting to explore now. You know, anything

from the possibility that one day you'll come here and there'll be a professional board of directors, instead of a voted-on one. So, like ninety-nine percent of the other societies, they cull people from the professional world, and from the educational world and cultural world, to be part of the board, and very often they donate money. You know, we're scared about those options, too, because we've been so old school for 150 years—will we lose our essence, will we lose our soul the day that we do something like that? But, you know, we've been working with Cadwalader law firm. They're like the biggest law firm, they're doing some of their work for us pro bono, helping us decide what's the best future for the Society so that we can guarantee that we'll be open for years and years to come. I mean, let's face it, the Society has one really big plus in its favor: we're 150 years old. You know? [00:55:09]

And, actually, to give you an idea of what we still do sometimes, and how it comes back to us. There's this older man, my guess is he's eighty-five years old, guy from Spain. At one time, you could see, he had a great skill set for writing, and he was a journalist, but he literally does not know how to use a computer. He's a little bit down on his luck, so he comes here, even though he's a smart guy, he's eighty-eight, he doesn't have a lot of income. So he just kind of asked, you know, is there anything that he could do, maybe for a little bit of money on the side. And we said, "Look, we don't really have a job," I said, "but why don't you do me a favor?" I said, "Since you really seem to know your stuff, why don't you go to like the deepest catacombs of these libraries that don't have their archive online yet, and see what you can find out about our Society and Little Spain." After about a month he came back, and we need to get it verified, but he actually found a document that states—in the old days, if you wanted to incorporate, it wasn't like you do today. You had to actually go through a session of the Congress of New York State. He found a document that incorporated the Spanish Benevolent Society of New York, not to 1868 like we always thought, but 1839. We have to verify that it wasn't a different Spanish Benevolent Society, but if so—you know, there was a lot of unions of clubs, so our date is for La Nacional, which is 1868, that we could verify. We never knew why we were called Spanish Benevolent Society, but we might have found the reason why. So at some point, we're probably the result of ten different mergers of clubs. So, if we go to 1839 we would be the oldest club of its kind, in other words, representing a specific ethnic society in New York City, and that's saying a lot for this small community.

It would also kind of throw a lot of our plans up in the air because we've been waiting for these big 150<sup>th</sup> celebrations, when the King and Queen of Spain are coming. So I'm not sure, if we're going to announce the change I think we'll wait till after they come [Zapol laughs] so, yeah.

**Zapol:** It sounds like also there's a real history of arts and culture with the Society. Can you tell me a little bit about some of the artists who've been through this building, or the earlier location perhaps.

**Sanfiz:** Sure.

**Zapol:** And, you know, why you think that's an important part of the Society.

**Sanfiz:** Well, like any Society there's a lot of stories. Which ones are verifiable and which ones are not? We have a series of historians that actually come in here that like to look things up. But we can tell you one thing is for sure: even today, if a Spaniard—and we've had some very famous ones come through our doors, from ex-Presidents to actors, and you name them. They still come here, because they know that New York is New York; this is the center of the world. When you say you're the cultural society of New York, it means a lot. That's why, even when we're talking about the Japan Society and the French Society, I spoke to them, and they said, "No, no, no, the ones in New York are the ones that everyone wants to be a part of." Especially since we're in this fun neighborhood, too, they all come in. So, if it was anything like it used to be—remember, this is New York at the turn of the century, when if you were an immigrant, or even if you were someone that was pretty well known, the chance that you might know English really well was probably not great. So, where did you go? You went to these little ethnic communities. So the stories of the famous Spaniards who have spent time here are numerous.

The one that seems to be most verifiable that everyone always talks about is the famous poet Federico García Lorca, who actually wrote a very famous anthology called *Poeta en New York*. It is said that he stayed in room 2 for three days, and would always come here to have a cup of coffee. Even though he lived most of his time up at Columbia University. I'm sure, like anybody, you'd like to come down and hang out with your compatriots every once in a while, and that was very common.

We had a work donated to us via the Roosevelt family, which, you could still see his photo up here, has not moved in all those years. Franklin Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor, was a big Hispanophile, and she actually donated a piece of work by the artist Joaquín Sorolla. And Sorolla, for example, if you've ever seen the Hispanic museum that's over on 155<sup>th</sup> Street, he did a series of paintings that are the size of huge wall murals. They're amazing. And they, for the first time ever, five years ago, went on tour in Spain, and it was by far and away the biggest art show that there ever was in Spain. So Sorolla is a huge star in the art world. He had donated a piece here, that stayed above our mantel place here, on our fireplace, for many decades, until some time in the late 1970s, somebody made an exact replica and stole it. [01:00:49]

So, yeah, one of the many stories that we have here. You know, [Salvador] Dalí has been here. The, [Luis] Buñuel, the famous Spanish director, spent time here. Some people say [Pablo] Picasso. I don't think so, but anyway. You know, it's certainly conceivable, as the one club, the largest of the clubs, and as the one place that represented all of Spain. At some point, most people have stopped in. So yeah, you know, everyone in New York's got their stories about famous people, and we all are blasé about them at the same time that we're proud [laughs] one of those?

So yeah, I always like this Sarah Jessica Parker story, who we always hear all the time. I think it was her, that she was on Jay Leno, and they were talking about how New Yorkers always try to be so cool when it comes to famous people, that we just ignore them. And she's like, "But they take it to extremes, because I'll be at like a party, where I know perfectly well that they know who I am, but they'll come up to me and they'll be like, 'Oh, what's your name?' And I'll be like, 'I'm Sarah.' 'Oh, what do you do?' 'Oh, you know, I'm an actress.' 'Oh, what are you in?' 'I'm in a show called *Sex & The City*.' 'Oh, that's interesting; what's it like?'" And she's like, "I know you know who I am, you don't have to continue with the charade." [Zapol laughs] So, anyway, very New York.

**[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE 'Sanfiz\_RobertGVSHPOralHistory1.mp3'; BEGINNING OF SECOND AUDIO FILE 'Sanfiz\_RobertGVSHPOralHistory2.mp3']**

**Zapol:** Yeah, and that show, in a sense, also was a part of changing the Meatpacking District.

**Sanfiz:** For sure!

**Zapol:** And it sounds like, you know, some of the things you talk about—the changes, from the sex clubs, and Hogs and Heifers, to the very commercial district that we see today. A lot of people talk about that show as one of the—

**Sanfiz:** Well, it's funny, because I was living in Spain at the time that *Sex & The City* was very popular, and of course over there it was called *Sexo en Nueva York*, and it was a phenomenon. More so in Europe than it was here. There's this funny thing about Europe: a lot of people might be anti-American, but people love New York. Oh, my god, they love New York! In fact, it was very easy, when people said "Where are you from," I'd say, "From New York." Because the smiles that you would get, as opposed to saying you're from the United States, was night and day.

So, that program, I still know, because even today, whenever we have a Spanish person here, they're like, "Oh, where's the house? Where's the house that Carrie lived?" That show was certainly one of the things that changed the neighborhood.

**Zapol:** And then you also talk about, you know, these stories of the artists that may have visited, and some who you know were here, and the stories around this place.

Can you tell me about what it's like to be in a space where you know that there have been generations of Spaniards here, some who are quite old who are still a part of the place? What does it mean, or what does it feel like to be in a place that has that kind of history, and what do you feel your responsibility is to that history?

**Sanfiz:** You're right, it's, believe me, as the executive director of a Society that's undergone a lot of changes, I get nervous sometimes. Change is not easy. It's not. So when we decided, for example, to do the projects that we're doing downstairs in the restaurant, some people love the fact that it was just a hole in the wall. I do too, I appreciate that, you know? I appreciate the fact that there's this familiar place, that is not fancy, and that anybody could feel that they could walk into. But we also started to feel like downstairs had gotten to the point where it was representing a vision of Spain that is so far in the past, that does not longer exist. And while Americans still seem to kind of like what they thought was Spain, Spaniards would come here and be like, "That restaurant really needs to go." You know, you need something that looks more like what we expect of a Spanish restaurant today. Which doesn't have to be fancy. And we're certainly not

going for fancy. But it is this very delicate balance that we try to sustain between the fact that we don't want to become this fancy restaurant/club/meeting place, but that we also want it to be a place that more reflects the way people in Spain are today. We're working on that.

And yeah, you're right, when it comes to the decisions of the Society, too, there's a lot of burden on my shoulders, and the rest of the board of directors, to make sure that we keep in mind—I would put it this way: as many problems as the Society has had, especially over the past four decades, we're still here. So, say what you want, you know, we still made it. I think the fact that we haven't sold out upstairs, and that we still keep it—the temptation's strong, right? The temptation to go for the money's strong. But we haven't. And there's a lot of expenses here. That's one of the things, you know, we are this non-profit, but we spend 80,000 dollars a year in property tax. So how this non-profit Benevolent Society is supposed to sustain itself sometimes, with all the expenses that we have, it's not easy. So the urge to sell out is sometimes based in need, because we go, “Gosh, how can we continue to give that room upstairs for 500 dollars a month and still meet our bills?” So these are the things I think New York needs to address. At what point are you going to get rid of all these people who really care about the community?

To get back a little bit to myself, every day I think about leaving. I don't want to. My family does not want to. My kids are very used to life here. We've made friends. We're very much part of our community. We're very involved in our school at PS 3 on Hudson Street. I'm in charge of getting the venue every year for the big fundraiser. But it becomes hard. It becomes hard. And I really feel like the city is doing very, very little to keep people like me, people who love the community, people who make a good salary, a decent salary in any other place of the world except here. To feel that we scrape by month-to-month is something that we should not be feeling. So, when is the city going to recognize that? When is the city going to recognize that places like this, that are 150 years old, don't deserve to pay 80,000 dollars a year in taxes when we're trying to help people. You know? These are the types of things that I wish the city would take a closer look at. [00:05:20]

**Zapol:** So, I'm not sure if we covered this, but you said that your responsibilities started to change at a certain point. What is your position now? When did you assume that position?

**Sanfiz:** I started off basically as the attorney for the Society, and then after we came to the legal agreement, my role shifted. In the very beginning, for the first couple years, I just had taken on a role like the general secretary of the Society. It was kind of general secretary/the attorney for the Society. Then there was no such thing, even as the executive director. And then when we started to realize that my role was very different, we said, well look, the executive director's the person that runs the day-to-day of the Society. I was always very comfortable with this balance of spending about half of my day, especially the morning, at my law office, and the other half of my day here at the Society. But that's becoming more difficult every day, and ever since the restaurant closed a month ago, that fifty-fifty has become more like ninety-ten. But, you know, we'll figure a way.

**Zapol:** Since we're on audio here, can you describe the space of this building? Maybe how some of the functions of the spaces have changed over the years?

**Sanfiz:** Sure, sure.

**Zapol:** If you can, and—

**Sanfiz:** I'll tell this anecdote about my first day that I was given the keys here. To give you an idea of just how different this Society was. The first day that I walked into the event space downstairs, it was a mess. It had this dropdown ceiling where half the panels were missing. It had these terrible small windows they took away. In fact, we actually called up the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation when we were thinking about changing our windows, because we're trying to recover the old look of the brownstone, and we spoke to some people there that gave us some advice, and we put in these beautiful 40,000 dollar windows that mirror exactly what the building once looked like.

But the first day that I had walked in, in the back of the space there was a person lying on the floor. He was contorted in a way that just did not seem normal. I thought that this guy must be incredibly drunk. I went over to him, and kind of sensed that he was not responding, and it turned out he had died. So, that was my first day in this space. What happened was that the old administration had a lot of people that would hang around, and they let some guy sleep there, and he would take four chairs, put them together—you could see the four chairs, he used as his bed. And you could see where he was, kind of sleeping on his arm, and that he was dead. I remember

calling up one of the guys that was here, one of these old time Spanish guys, and he came downstairs, and in a very matter-of-factly way was like, “*Este está muerto.*” Which translates to “This guy’s dead.” A guy he had known for forty years. That’s the old school way, you know, and I remember for me it was a total shock. But for him it was just like, “Ok, come on, call the ambulance and let’s move on.” So, this was kind of what we all were up against in the very beginning. So, believe me, a lot of the change was for the better. Because that’s kind of the mentality that existed.

And, you know, a lot of Spanish Societies in the Americas are suffering, because at what point are you able to have that transition from the older generation to the new? Which happens everywhere, but in Spain it happens to be particularly pronounced, because you’re talking about a country—my other side is American, Anglo-Saxon. The two ways of looking at things from both of my cultures are very unique. In one way, I remember, when I would go see my grandparents on the American side, in California, they almost were uncomfortable with my hugging, which I thought was normal. It would almost be like my grandfather would extend his hand out first, for the handshake; that’s the Smith side. And then I would go to Spain, in Barajas Airport, and I could hear my grandmother as we just walked through the glass on the other side, she would be wailing, like, on the floor having convulsions from just the mere fact that she had seen her. I remember that always shaking me up, how different it was. [00:10:15]

But there was almost this sense of continuity on the Anglo side, because they grew up in United States, and so there wasn’t a pronounced difference between the older generation and the younger generation. In many ways, I joke around with my mom, I’m like, “Mom, you’re Grandma.” But in Spain, you’re talking about people who were raised under the dictatorship. When you look at Spain today, you can’t even believe that there used to be a dictatorship there. You can’t! It’s about as open a country there, socially, that there is. Anything goes! It’s an anything-goes attitude in Spain. And here, it’s the same. You get the older generation, who has a very, very different mindset from the younger generation of Spaniards, and that has affected all the cultural clubs throughout the Americas. We went to Tampa last year, and Tampa has three of the great Spanish cultural centers. That was probably the biggest Spanish community, in Tampa, Florida. They’re beautiful, works of art, you’ve never seen anything like them. They all have one thing in common: they’re closed. They’re closed, because they were not able to transition. Ok?

We were on the precipice. And thankfully we were able to make that transition. But we speak to the immigrant department over at the embassy at Washington, and he had recently come here, and we had asked him, “Hey, what can we learn from some of the other successful clubs, we know there’s a huge one in Cuba, another one in Puerto Rico,” and he kind of said to us, “When I come here it’s the only place I kind of see hope, because you guys were able to make that transition.:

So, anyway, to get back to the question, we recognize the importance for change. Because it was the only way that we were going to survive, because we’ve seen it. But we are also incredibly mindful of the Society’s history, because you take away that history, what do we have? To give you an idea, though, we’ve done a lot of small renovations—whenever we accumulate some money, we put a renovation in one room or the other. So we had done something in our attic, and when we were up in the attic, we saw all these bottles from the Prohibition Era. We saw a calendar, a datebook from 1903. We have all the stuff sitting outside. We found newspaper clippings from the 1910s. We certainly did not throw that stuff away. It’s all being proudly displayed. So, yeah, this building’s got a lot of secrets. A lot of stuff has happened.

**Zapol:** At one point was there a hospital? Or two floors of a kind of hospital in this space?

**Sanfiz:** Well, during its heyday, the Society owned two floors of Saint Vincent’s Hospital.

**Zapol:** I see, uh huh.

**Sanfiz:** Which was actually very common in those days, so immigrant groups—it’s not the medical system we have today, you know? This was, you know, just better find your way. So what happened was that you had to find your own doctors, so we had set up in Saint Vincent’s Hospital.

The Society today still has six major cemetery plots, in different cemeteries throughout Queens and Brooklyn. At one point, if you were a Spanish immigrant, and you died, you weren’t going back. There was no money for that. So you were interred with other Spaniards. And we had these beautiful kind of little headstones with all the names, every year, of somebody, and they’re all buried there, and we still get family that come back. And in fact, you know, if

someone dies today, they don't really need the cemetery plots. But every once in a while—we had a waitress that worked downstairs, five years ago, and she had a big family, and she died suddenly at thirty-five years old. The family didn't have that type of money; she was the breadwinner. And we put her up in our cemetery. And I still get very emotional sometimes when I think about it, because I remember all the kids there, and they were crying, and all the community was there. And I remember thinking: this huge expense, who knows what they would have had to have done otherwise? And the fact that she is here and these families and this kid will continue to come back to the cemetery that says—she wasn't even Spanish, she was Dominican. But that they will come, and we take great pride in having this—Spain means a lot to a lot of people. In the Hispanic community, it's always been this mixed bag. That's the best way I could put it. Because Spain, at one point, was viewed as the oppressors, but at the same time is largely responsible for what is the Hispanic race today. Anything from the culture to the language to names to a lot of the cuisine. [00:15:19]

One thing I know that I certainly try to do is try to bridge those two communities. The Society itself actually founded a parade that goes up Fifth Avenue that's called "*El Día Del Hispanidad*." And it's the day before Columbus Day—which, as a Spaniard, I say this, I was married to an Italian-American, but as a Spaniard, we always laugh at the fact that somehow Columbus Day is celebrated as an Italian holiday. I've made this analogy in the past, I've said, "Imagine is Neil Armstrong, for whatever reason, happened to—" Because what we do know about Columbus is that he was definitely born—we don't know where he was born, but what we do know is that he was a Spanish citizen, wrote perfect Spanish, so didn't have the typical mistakes an Italian would, especially an Italian who supposedly came at twenty. And what is for sure is that when he went to the Americas, he didn't put up the Italian flag, he put up the Spanish flag, and so I'll often laugh to my Italian friends and family. I'll say, "Imagine Neil Armstrong happened to have been born in England. But came over the United States, studied with NASA, flew on American know-how and put up the American flag, but that five hundred years later it is celebrated as a British or whatever-he-might-have-been-born accomplishment. So, anyway, not to take anything away from the Italians, but we have our parade the day before, and that is the people probably who most should be celebrating, because for good or for bad, it was the creation of "*El Día Del Hispanidad*," the day of the Hispanic race. And Spain, we founded it, we actually still have the parade, and twenty-two Spanish-speaking nations all march together. In a day of

great unity. And it's one of those few days that there's goodwill for everybody. So we'll hear things like blowing kisses, and they'll be like "*madre patria*," which will be like mother country. So it's one of those few days that as a Spaniard you feel pretty good.

So, anyway—I guess just to finish on that, we very much take pride in the fact that this is not just about the Spanish community but also very much a place open to the Spanish-speaking community, and always will be. And going back to my story in Queens, I always identified in many ways much more with Hispanics than ever with Spaniards, because I didn't know them, so I am really very happy that we are open to everyone.

**Zapol:** You've said, the other places in Florida, the other Spanish Societies, they sold out. What would that mean to you here? What is the risk there? Would that be closing? What does that mean?

**Sanfiz:** Well, you know, sometimes when I'm working here until twelve midnight, I sometimes, like we all do, we question why we do what we do, and, you know, and there's going to have to come a time that I move on, because it takes up a lot of my time. And I always have been saying that. I mean, I love working here, but I have three kids, so at some point I will have to move on. I always hope that that will be once we're really set for the future. What would kill me is if I came back in fifty years and we were closed, because we didn't do what we were supposed to do for the future. One of my driving impulses is to make sure that this Society, which has meant so much, to so many people, will still stay open. And make the changes that we need to ensure that.

**Zapol:** You talk about, in the [19]70s a lot of places closed because of the neighborhood, because of the economics of the neighborhood, and also what was happening more largely in New York at that time. That people weren't necessarily having the customers, and also didn't live here anymore. But then, why places are closing in the last few years, is a completely different reason. Do you want to speak a little bit to that?

**Sanfiz:** I can tell you this: we receive three or four phone calls a day from real estate agents, and I am not kidding. And all they do is say, "When are you selling? We can offer you cash money right now, 15,000,000 dollars, ok?" So, right now this administration is full steam ahead. There's nothing that can deter us. But imagine things change, and those offers start to look a lot more appealing. That could happen. [00:20:31]

So, you're right, there is a lot of economic pressure. One of the things that I do is I represent the nuns that are located up the street. Actually, that's a little bit of a footprint of Spain, because those nuns, their headquarters is actually Madrid. Ok? And you know they're a home for young single women. It's right here, it's only two blocks down. So I've represented them in some of—there's development going on on both sides of them now. Ok? They just made that one huge building, not even particularly attractive, with apartments starting at 1,800,000. And now, right next to them, we're negotiating the agreement so that they can begin construction on the other side of the nuns. The amount of money that is being discussed, just for licensing agreement, it makes you realize that this city and its real estate is just the driving force of everything. In many ways, the city has benefitted, in some aspects, but until we figure out a way, the temptation for us and a lot of these other non-profits—you guys heard about the school that was run by the church around the corner on 15<sup>th</sup> Street. It used to be one of the only affordable places, my last child was ready to go there. They had pre-school option for 8,000 dollars a year, which, I mean, that's just a gift. A gift. And it closed. It closed because they got offered 30,000,000 dollars for their building. Oh, and there was the Queen Sofia Institute, ok? One of Spain's great other—located on the Upper East Side. It was there for forty years. They got offered 48,000,000 dollars for their townhouse. And you know what, they struggled with the decision, until they started to say what everybody else says: "Well, let's use that money and open up somewhere else more affordable." And in both the two instances I gave you, they never opened up anywhere else.

**Zapol:** So, I mean, it sounds like those are the pressing issues of this moment right now.

**Sanfiz:** Yup. Yup.

**Zapol:** And—

**Sanfiz:** Let's say, for example, the restaurant is not successful. Let's imagine that we made a big financial mistake there. And already people hardly get paid here. And what if, you know, we can't meet our next property tax bill? You know? Maybe when a developer comes and says, "Hey look, I can do this," and they come. They come, it's not just the real estate agents. The developers say, "Hey look, let me get the two top floors, we're going to pay you 4,000,000 dollars, we're going to do something here and there," and the offers are there all the time.

**Zapol:** It sounds like this is the stuff that might keep someone up at night.

**Sanfiz:** Yeah, yup, but you know, thankfully, we have a building that's completely paid for. Ok? We have a luxury that a lot of other places don't, so in that sense we have some room to make mistakes, and still survive.

**Zapol:** I want to thank you for your time today. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you wanted to share today? You know, perhaps a detail about the history of the Society, or about your own history.

**Sanfiz:** No, but I will tell you this though. Why I really thank your organization is because it's precisely what we need, you know, people like you guys who fight for the community. And we have this really great story about when I made a presentation about a year ago, and I mean this is really—these are the moments why I realize why I do this. I almost start to tear up when I tell the story, because it was really one of these moments I'll never forget. We have a real treasure trove here. And that is: we have the membership cards of thousands, 10,000 or more, Spanish immigrants that came here. And each of those cards, over the last hundred years, has an unbelievable amount of information, from their photos, to where they were born, where their parents were born. So it's not just you found out about the first immigrant, you could find out about where they came from in Spain, when they died, where they were buried, what they did, their children. All this great information. And they're beautiful. They're these beautiful, old, aging cards. They look fantastic. So I knew when I made the presentation I wanted to show some of them off, and so I took a handful. Of the 10,000 or so cards I took literally a handful, about 200 of them, and I kind of thumbed through them to see the ones that just seemed most interesting, like there was one where the guy looked right out of a gangster movie, another one where there's this really attractive woman, another one just of this young girl, and there was this one of this cute kid in a bowtie, probably was eight years old, and I used those as the four or five examples. [00:26:07]

So, here we are, a year ago, and I'm giving the presentation, when right before the presentation a guy comes up to me. He tells me his name. And I said, "Wait." His name was Secondino, that's how I remember, because it was a little bit of a strange name. And I said, "Is your last name Fernandez, by any chance?" Because I started to—I was like, "Oh my god, this

looks exactly like the little boy in that picture,” but he’s like seventy-five now, or eighty. And he’s like, “Yes.” I was like, “Oh my god,” and I showed him the card. He started to cry. He started to cry when he saw himself at that age, and he couldn’t believe that. And he stayed, he was at the presentation. There weren’t a lot of Spaniards, he was one of them. And when we were there, and we gave the presentation in front of the Greenwich Village Society, I said, I actually said, “Just five minutes ago, I met him.” And the people were up on their feet and clapping and it was one of those moments that you really saw the community come together in something that we can all share, and that’s like about our past and what attracts us to this place and what we still want to strive to fight for.

So, you know, the last thing would really be a thank you to you guys, because as someone who works in non-profit, a lot of it feels like you don’t get a lot of recognition for what you do. And what you’re doing right now, for example, I’m sure there’s time you go, “Oh god, this is tough work,” you know, “Will it be worth it?” And I can promise you it will be. It will be.

**Zapol:** Thank you, and thank you for your time today.

**Sanfiz:** Ok, good. Thank you.

**[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE ‘Sanfiz\_RobertGVSHPOralHistory2.mp3’;  
BEGINNING OF THIRD AUDIO FILE ‘Sanfiz\_RobertGVSHPOralHistory3.mp3’]**

**Zapol:** Go ahead.

**Sanfiz:** So I just wanted to tell a little bit about what the Spanish Civil War was, here in New York as well, because this community was incredibly divided. The Spanish Civil War is very unique in history, because unlike most civil wars, which are usually a fight for land or ethnic strife or religious division, or something financial, the Spanish Civil War was literally a war between conservatives and liberals. I remember being a young boy, and my father would tell me stories of the war. My father would say to me, “You know, you never know, these things could happen anywhere.” And I would laugh, I’d say, “Not here, Dad, I mean, go back to your old world ideas. “This could never happen in a place like the United States.” And he said to me, “You know, Spain, after losing the Spanish-American War in 1898, realized that here’s this great world empire that had nothing. That had nothing. So people started to point fingers. The Left

said, 'It's your fault.' The Right said, 'It's your fault,' and this carried on for fifty years, as the decline of the empire."

So, some of the things my father used to say, in today's political climate, don't seem so crazy anymore. You know? Sometimes I worry about an election gone wrong, and next thing you know they're shooting because they're saying, we don't recognize it. So, anyway, the point is that there's precedent, because it happened in Spain. And families were torn apart, ok? I'm sure you have family in your immediate family that don't think the same way politically as you do. And that's what would happen. So, towns were torn apart. If the soldiers from one side came in, they said, "No, those are the liberals," or "Those are the conservatives." It was terrible.

And here, it happened as well. So, in fact, one of the photos I showed during the presentation I'd given was Casa Moneo. It was a real institution. I mean, those were the guys—they made Little Spain, as much as we did. They were like the big store, with all the Spanish goods, and there's several floors, run by families for generations, and it closed in like [19]92, ok? And everybody always talks about it, whenever they talk about Little Spain, the first thing they say is "Casa Moneo!"

But Casa Moneo supported the dictatorship. Ok? The dictatorship was not like what we see today. It was people who were conservatives. Spain was probably headed for a dictatorship anyway, whether the Left or the Right won. It was just a very complicated time after the Spanish Civil War. But the point is that they would be the entire community, and as you can see in this particular photo, there were people that would sit out in front saying "Do not buy fascist merchandise." And it tore our community apart.

And Spain is still one of those few countries where you can't really discuss politics. In this place, we don't discuss it. And the fact that I'm an American of Spanish descent—I kind of feel a bit immune to it, but I always know it's good practice never to bring up politics.

And what's funny here in the United States—I told you I was the editor-in-chief of my school newspaper, and it was during the time of the first Gulf War. It had just broken out, and we were just kind of written up in the AP [Associated Press], because there was this young man who took an exact copy of our newspaper and wrote, "Gulf War," before the actual Gulf War broke out, "Gulf War Breaks Out, 100,000 US Soldiers Dead." Ok? Then he distributed it in the middle

of the night, and people who woke up thought that they were reading our newspaper saying that people had died, and there were stories of this one woman, whose husband was located overseas fighting—who was stationed, you know, having an attack, and, so, it was big news.

But I remember that even during the Gulf War I would write editorials about politics and nobody cared. It would be the one guaranteed editorial that I just knew we'd get no comments on. People didn't care. It just was a time when—do you remember, like, your friends were would say, "I'm Republican, because I like to save my money!" You know, it was like those type of things, right? It's changed.

**Zapol:** Yeah, it has.

**Sanfiz:** It's changed a lot here.

**Zapol:** It must have been a split population here at La Nacional, so I wonder, how did they deal with these divisions among the group?

**Sanfiz:** Well, you know, the Society's kind of known for having a lot of different phases politically. So, even the word "*la nacional*"—funny, it has no connotation to me, but the word "*la nacional*" in Spain is going to be a little bit tricky because it kind of signifies a little bit of, like, you know, the country. You know? In Spain, that's not the way people like to talk. People don't talk that way. They view it to be perhaps a fascist connotation. So, of course, it's been our nickname since 1868, long before any problems, so we still wear it with pride. But yeah, it's tricky. [00:05:17]

So of course after the Spanish Civil War there was a lot of refugees from the Republican side that came here. So, we've known a little bit of everything.

**Zapol:** Uh-huh. But still, that trying to keep neutral that you've talked about yourself, is that also part of the representation of the Society itself, not talking about politics—

**Sanfiz:** Absolutely. We do. Now, we allow our space—we have political groups that come in here, and we'll allow one just like we'll allow the next, but we also are very wary that Spain has regional divisions, and our board of directors has many people from the Catalan region and the Basque region. And even Galicia, which is actually where I'm from, also has a separatist

movement. So, you know, I would say that a lot of those problems don't exist so much here in New York, because when people hardly even know what Spain, they're certainly not going to know what your little region is. So, either way, the Society makes sure that we kind of stay very neutral.

**Zapol:** But that's interesting. I mean, you know, as I was setting up the mic, I saw you were trying to figure out what the cuisine was going to be downstairs. I wonder if you think about how do you represent Spain—

**Sanfiz:** Well, it's true, because you go to Spain, it's like visiting seven different countries. You know, you go see Andalucía is where the stereotypes of Spain come together, where bullfighting and flamenco come from. But where my father's region of Spain, Galicia, actually comes from the Gaelic, and my father used to go to Irish weddings and would know how to dace the jig and play the bagpipe better than they did. And there's no such thing as flamenco or even one bullfighting arena.

So it's just a very different way in Spain, it's hard, you're right. So one of the things we have done—it looks like our first chef is probably going to come from the Basque country. And you know, it's probably the best tradition of food, is in the Basque country, so that's where our first chef will come from, but it'll be rotating. Even that part, some people are like, "It's not the Basque country! It's Galicia! Or it's Madrid!" So yeah. So yeah.

**Zapol:** Another thing that I noted, I think it's in this presentation, where you talked about, even the Spanish-American War, there being some history around tensions towards, perhaps, the Society here.

**Sanfiz:** There was. In fact, that was a very complicated time, because if you can imagine all these people that are adopting America and loving their new country, but who realize that the country has gone to war with their old country, that could not have been easy. Could not. It's kind of how like I feel if they ever say to me, "What if United States play Spain in the World Cup final?" [Laughs] I'd say, "I don't think that will ever happen, and if it does, we'll cross that bridge when it does." So, but, you know—actually my answer would be, now United States, ok, because Spain won one.

But anyway, that was a particularly tough time here because that war was over pretty quick, and we had a lot of the Spanish soldiers, and a very well known general in Spanish history, were all captured, and they were in Washington. And what had happened was our President, the President of this Society, was able to get permission from the President of the United States himself, [William] McKinley, and ask for the ability to gather aid and money to help out the prisoners of war, which were going to eventually be sent back to Spain. He was granted permission by the President—this is our President, the President of our Society—and they went down there and presented after collecting money, and I think it was the *New York Sun* or one of the papers that was just in the day, actually called our President up for—that he should have been brought up on treason. So, you know, that’s a pretty strong thing to label on somebody. So, yeah, you can imagine, it was complicated times.

**Zapol:** Yes, a strong history in terms of the relationships of the countries and to larger politics. It seems like that’s been a theme that we’ve talked about through this conversation.

**Sanfiz:** Right.

**Zapol:** So was there, is there anything else? Oh, you were going to show me the image of the—

**Sanfiz:** Oh, right.

**Zapol:** —of the boy, of Segundo [Secondino].

**Sanfiz:** Oh, right. [00:09:57]

Here’s a kind of nice photo. The Spanish Pavilion was actually really well known in the 1964 World’s Fair, even though Spain was this kind of poor dictatorship at the time, they kind of went overboard for the [19]64 World’s Fair. No wonder my mother married a Spaniard. [laughter] So, these are our members that were the, they took a lot of the spots for the, for our pavilion.

**Zapol:** With the airplane in front, the Iberia airplane.

**Sanfiz:** Oh, right. That’s all of our members, getting ready to fly to Spain. I particularly love this photo because it’s just so kind of the 1950s glory of flying. Oh, so here they are: here’s this cute little girl, and look at all that information about the guy, and when he died, how old he was, and

you could see what part of Spain. This is the year he became a member, 1929; where he was living, on Tompkins Avenue in Brooklyn; his profession; what his state was, whether single—as you can see, at one point “single,” crossed out, and then say “married.” He was the son of José and Fermina, what parts of Spain they were from as well. And then here it talks about what year he died, 10/16 of 1953 at 10 PM. He was interred at the Funerario Ortiz, and he’s buried at All Saints Cavalry Cemetery, which is one of our cemetery plots.

**Zapol:** Hm.

**Sanfiz:** This guy. That’s what I was saying, this guy looks straight out of a gangster movie. [Zapol laughs] So there he is. There he is, and that’s—I swear to god, and you could just see it! So yeah, it was a really special moment. He was a member in 1955, and still living. Still living right here in the neighborhood.

**Zapol:** Wow.

**Sanfiz:** One of the few old timers.

**Zapol:** And you were saying he lives on 17<sup>th</sup> Street.

**Sanfiz:** Yeah, I think 17<sup>th</sup> Street. I actually went to go see his home. He invited me over to his house. He’s an architect today, and he actually was born in Cuba to Spanish parents. That was another interesting period. There’s a lot of Spaniards from Cuba that left during all the political strife. A lot of them are very, you know, well-connected in Cuba, or especially were. He’s an example. So he still travels to Cuba all the time, and does a lot of the architectural work for some of their buildings and stuff. At one point, we’ve always had a lot of Cubans here as well.

**Zapol:** Mm, mm.

**Sanfiz:** So.

**Zapol:** And it’s an interesting moment right now, with American relationship to Cuba, too.

**Sanfiz:** Sure.

**Zapol:** And now do you continue to have relationships with Cuban Americans, or less so?

**Sanfiz:** Well, we actually host the Cuban Cultural Center's annual gala. It's held here. So, that's good. Cuba was always kind of known as the jewel of Spain's crown. And Havana's an amazing place. And as people who love the preservation, I mean, Havana, in some ways, is going to benefit unlike any other city in the Americas, precisely because it has not been built up. So, I am praying, praying, that when they do open up they do it in a very wise way, because if they keep all that stuff and renovate it, you're going to have an incredibly unique city.

**Zapol:** Right, the other namesake of La Nacional is there, right? The hotel in Havana.

**Sanfiz:** Oh, that's right, that's right. That's a good point!

**Zapol:** When I told someone I was coming here to speak with you, they said, "Oh, you're not going to Havana though." [laughs]

**Sanfiz:** Right, no, no, but that's definitely on the list. What's funny is that most Spaniards go there, because it's always been open to Spaniards. And there was actually a time that you were allowed to buy a little property if you were a Spaniard. Now they closed that window up. But yeah, you know, so there's still—it's going to be an interesting time, when Cuba opens up, that's for sure.

**Zapol:** Uh-huh. Well, this is such a cute picture. Thank you for showing this to me, and I'm sure the conversation will continue in some way. It doesn't really end, but I thank you again for today.

**Sanfiz:** Ok.

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**

## Additional Photographs



Robert Sanfiz at La Nacional/Spanish Benevolent Society at 239 W. 14th Street, on March 28, 2016.  
Photograph by Liza Zapol.