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## Lesson Plan for High School

### Latino Oral Histories



**Central Question:** What can oral histories tell us about the challenges Latino immigrants faced when they first came to New Jersey?

#### Materials

- PowerPoint
- Oral Histories 1-4
- Guiding Questions
- Corroboration Organizer

#### Plan of Instruction

- 1) Use PowerPoint slides to introduce the topic of Oral History and the central question of the lesson.

- a. **Slide One:** An *Oral History* is the collection and study of historical information using sound recordings of interviews with people having personal knowledge of past events.
- b. **Slide Two:** An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format.
- c. **Slide Three:** Oral histories are used to expand what we know about history and challenge the idea of whose history is deemed valuable. Instead of only learning about the stories of notable people and historic figures, we can learn about the history of people in our own communities. This is especially important for preserving the history of marginalized communities who are often overlooked in mainstream history.
- d. **Slide Four:** The New Jersey Hispanic Research and Information Center at the Newark Public Library conducted fifteen interviews with leaders from New Jersey's Latino community. In this lesson, you will be reading excerpts from four of these interviews.
- e. **Slide Five:** In the oral histories you will read, the interviewees share their memories of their struggles growing up as immigrants and the children of Latino immigrants in different neighborhoods in New Jersey.
- f. **Slide Six:** These oral histories are a powerful tool for learning first-hand about the struggles of a community. In this lesson you will answer the question: What can oral histories tell us about the challenges Latino immigrants faced when they first came to New Jersey?

### Round One:

- 1) Pass out Oral History 1 and 2, the guiding questions, and the corroboration organizer.
  - a. In pairs, students read the documents and answer the guiding questions.
  - b. Share out responses.
  - c. Students complete relevant sections of the corroboration organizer.
  - d. Share out evidence showing hardships Latino immigrants faced

### Round Two:

- 2) Pass out Oral History 3 and 4, the guiding questions, and the corroboration organizer.
  - e. In pairs, students read the documents and answer the guiding questions.
  - f. Share out responses.
  - g. Students complete relevant sections of the corroboration organizer.
  - h. Share out evidence showing hardships Latino immigrants faced

## Final Discussion

- a. What similarities and differences do you see among the four oral histories?
- b. What struggles did the subjects of the oral histories face when they came to America? Are these struggles similar to ones immigrants still face today?
- c. How can oral histories aid in our understanding of a group of people?

## Final Writing

- a. Individually, have students write 1 or 2 paragraphs addressing the central historical question.

## Oral History 1: Interview with Juan Cartagena

*In this excerpt of an oral history from the Latino Life Stories project, Juan Cartagena discusses growing up in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in Jersey City.*

**Interviewer:** So you had an apartment?

**Juan Cartagena (JC):** We had apartments. Six, many!

**Interviewer:** Many?

**JC:** Many.

**Interviewer:** Why did you move so much?

**JC:** Rent was more affordable somewhere else.

**Interviewer:** But still in Jersey City?

**JC:** Yeah. Jersey City's downtown was unique, I mean, I don't think it's unique nationally, necessarily, it's really similar to the rest of urban America.

**Interviewer:** Um-hm.

**JC:** It's somewhere where you have large **metropolises** that create centers and attract people to jobs. You have the ebb and flow of land market values. The Jersey City that I grew up in was one of the worst areas of the city. Nobody wanted to live there. It was changing **demographically** because more Puerto Ricans were coming. More whites were leaving. The whites that were leaving were working class Italians and the whites that stayed were working class Italians. The blacks that stayed were working class blacks, and Puerto Ricans, of course were all working class. So the downtown area was a thriving area of working class communities that were able to through their nucleus and building of business and church communities, maintain an ability to keep that community vibrant.

But it was **vibrant**, really, because the land value was considered so low, and I say that because it was easy for my mother to go from one apartment to another apartment. There was always affordable housing available. It wasn't a big stretch. We were supers, for example, **superintendents** of our buildings, because that gave us a break in our rents, but it was me and her. And I was, I was the only child. I grew up with my mom, she never married again and she never lived with a man again, from the moment I was born. So, you know, we were superintendents. So it was just me and her, you know, taking out garbage, cleaning hallway, but there was always enough, I'll never forget this, there was always enough places to live.

### **Vocabulary**

**Metropolis:** Large, busy city

**Demographics:** The characteristics of the population of an area

**Vibrant:** Energetic and lively

**Superintendent:** The person who is responsible for maintenance and repairs of an apartment building

***Source:*** Interview of Juan Cartagena, Esq. by Blanca Vega, 3/4/2008; Hispanic Reference Collection of the NJ Hispanic Research & Information Center at The Newark Public Library.

## Oral History 2: Interview with Jose E. Delgado Jr.

*In this excerpt, Jose E. Delgado Jr. shares the difficulties he faced in an English speaking classroom.*

**Jose E. Delgado Jr. (JD):** My father was stationed in Fort Buchanan, which is the big army base in Puerto Rico, and when I entered the first grade, um, and that's when I got my first lesson, and why I'm so, I was so passionate still about bilingual education because I didn't speak a word of English and here I was in Puerto Rico, in an army school with a Puerto Rican teacher who spoke perfect Spanish in the classroom, and she was not allowed to speak to me in Spanish. So I sat there for a whole year basically not knowing what the hell was going on, and getting into trouble and just wasting a year. So they failed me the first year, and, so, I mean I didn't, I don't know how I learned what, when I really started learning because I couldn't, you can't learn without knowing what the language is and see, that's when I first really – well, it was a horrible experience now that I think about it.

**Interviewer:** What grade were you in?

**JD:** That was the first grade.

**Interviewer:** That was the first grade.

**JD:** I remember running away from school and ending up in mother's house and she couldn't believe I found my way home.

**Interviewer:** Right, right. Wow. It was a year wasted; well, there was no real instruction on how to-

**JD:** There was no instruction. In other words, the first grade is really a continuation, should be a continuation of the education you get in the home because before a kid gets into the first grade, he's got a vocabulary, well, he should have a vocabulary close to 5,000 words. He knows how to put sentences together. He knows his colors. He knows, you know, different, you know, he has a, he has language. But you put, as they did to me, you put that child in an, in a language environment that is totally alien to the

preparation that he had before, well, then, I mean, it, it's psychologically, emotionally, and academically, you know, a **short-circuit**.

**Interviewer:** What about your other classmates? What do you remember from your other classmates?

**JD:** No, well, I don't, I don't remember the other, I don't remember, I remember bits and pieces, that's another thing, I don't remember anything really about the first grade, except sitting there and people laughing and talking and making sounds, you know, assuming that they are talking to each other and I was just sitting there looking around and like, I was, it was like I was outside of myself looking at what was going on.

I don't, maybe the, the teacher was really nice. She wasn't vicious, but she never attempted- except I remember one time when she, I did something because I was trying to get attention because after a while you feel isolated so you do weird things so, so people would turn and look at you or recognize or acknowledge that you're there and she took me outside and I think she spoke to me in Spanish for the first time out in the hall, you know, not in the room, but she said, I don't exactly remember what it was. But, that was the only time I remember there was any kind of communication. I am sure there were other times but that's the only time I remember. And I didn't learn anything.

### **Vocabulary**

**Short-Circuit:** An expression meaning to malfunction or fail

**Source:** *Interview of Jose E. Delgado, Jr. by Yamil Avivi, 2/12/2008; Hispanic Reference Collection of the NJ Hispanic Research & Information Center at The Newark Public Library.*

## Oral History 3: Interview with Carmen Luz Morales de Martinez

*In this excerpt, Carmen Martinez discusses her life as a Puerto Rican woman living in an ethnically mixed neighborhood in Camden, NJ.*

**Interviewer:** So what was it like, you know, being in a neighborhood with Italian and the Irish, I mean, at that time, ah, you know, it was a different neighborhood, or---?

**Carmen Martinez (CM):** It was a different neighborhood. I was younger and they thought we were gypsies, you know. And we didn't, we didn't do much mingling. And then later on they go to know me, and they were always asking me, how are you Carmen? How many children do you have?

**Interviewer:** And-

**CM:** And it, it was, they were, we felt that we were ridiculed. We felt that they, they didn't think very wisely of us because it wasn't too long when everybody started to move out, you know. The neighborhood started to change.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**CM:** So it was like you came in, and, and they all left. They started leaving. They, they wouldn't sometimes — when my kids got bigger — they wouldn't let the kids come, their kids, allowed in my house, until one day I set them straight. I told them the same thing that could happen to your child in my house could happen to my children in your house, you know. It could happen in your house. And I corrected them.

**Interviewer:** Thank you.

**CM:** I, I corrected them, you know. I said the same fear I have for my kids is the same fear that you have. And, you know, I started confronting them. My children went to Catholic school all their lives. I wanted to protect them because I knew Camden wasn't good but I wanted them to have the best. And I used to tell my children, I can't leave you money, but I am going to make sure you have a good education, and thank God, you know.

But it was, it was confrontational. I don't mean in a bad way, but I remember one time the man across the street — we had just moved in to the new house we bought and it wasn't new. The man came across the street from me and asked me to tell my husband to return the latter he had stolen because he had stolen it and, and I got very angry at him. I said, my husband was working then. I said, "My husband don't have a need to steal your latter! Why would he go in your yard and steal your —?" So it was that type of thing. People knocking on the door and asking you what did you, you know, oh it was—

You get an armor, you form an armor you know. And you gonna, instead of being **confrontational** in a negative way, I became **confrontational** in a proper way.

### **Vocabulary**

**Confrontational**: To deal with situations in an aggressive way

**Source:** *Interview of Carmen Luz Morales de Martinez by Yamil Avivi, 11/18/2007; Hispanic Reference Collection of the NJ Hispanic Research and Information Center at The Newark Public Library.*

## Oral History 4: Interview with Eliu Rivera

*In this excerpt, Eliu Rivera shares his early memories of school and his family.*

**Interviewer:** So what do you remember about your first day at school, the first experience at school? Do you remember?

**Eliu Rivera (ER):** Uh, that's a long time ago, but you know, like I say, I was always a very bright student in Puerto Rico. I was skipped. When they put me in school, I think I was less than four years old and I started, and I just kept on, on passing the grades, okay. So I was that, I mean I, I managed to pick up the English immediately and just continue, continue my schooling. Nevertheless, you know, we came from a large family. We used to live in a cold flat, an apartment. And remember there was eight of us, okay. It, it was not easy. As a matter of fact, where we lived, it was like a four story apartment building, okay, one apartment on each side. The bathroom that you used was shared by the two families, the left and the right. In order to take a bath you had one of those uh marble tubs, right there in the kitchen, okay. So, you know, it was, it was a heck of an experience in a way—

We, we lived, you know, we were a very poor family, okay. My father came here first. He got established; he got his little business together with another uh, another gentleman named Orthelio. And little by little he sent for us. Now with the family of eight, you know, it's not easy. So my mother, when she came here she was, you know, she never worked in Puerto Rico, but over here she, you know, she had to, okay. So my mother went to start working at the Wonderland Fashion factories, making dresses. And she worked there, it was the only job, you know, she only had and, and she worked there until, until the factory closed down.

My father had very little schooling. But very bright with numbers, especially with numbers, he was a wiz. So he got his grocery store and that's how he was able to support us, through the small business and my mother working.

**Source:** *Interview of Eliu Rivera by Mialgros Castillo, 10/27/2007; Hispanic Reference Collection of the NJ Hispanic Research & Information Center at The Newark Public Library.*

## **Guiding Questions**

### **Oral History 1: Juan Cartagena**

1. How did Juan Caratagena's neighborhood in Jersey City change **demographically**?
2. Why does Caratagena call his neighborhood **vibrant**?
3. How were Caratagena and his mother able to pay their rent?

### **Oral History 2: Jose E. Delgado**

1. What was Jose Delgado's biggest challenge as new student to the United States?
2. Why did Delagado's teacher finally speak to him in Spanish?

## **Guiding Questions**

### **Oral History 3: Carmen Martinez**

1. What was Carmen Martinez's relationship like with her neighbors?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What do you think Carmen means when she says that she became "confrontational in a proper way"?

### **Oral History 4: Eliu Rivera**

1. How was Eliu's family able to come to America?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What were his family's living conditions like?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. How did life change for his mother?

**Corroboration Organizer**

**Based on each oral history, what are the challenges that Latino immigrants faced in NJ?**

**Oral History 1: Juan Cartagena**

**Oral History 2: Jose E. Delgado Jr.**

**Oral History 3: Carmen Martinez**

**Oral History 4: Eliu Rivera**