

*George Rivera grew up in an apartment on the fifth floor of 703 East 156<sup>th</sup> Street (at that time, its address was 707). His family left shortly before the building was abandoned. It stood empty for almost 30 years, until Habitat-NYC renovated it. The following is George's reminiscences about his life in the South Bronx.*

## COMING TO AMERICA

At the age of 19, my mother, Eleuteria Rivera-Agosto, and her sister Olga, boarded a Trans Caribbean Airline plane in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1945. The plane may have been a DC-3 that had been used by the military, because she remembers that the seats were facing each other along the sides from front to back. The flight was very bumpy and my mother got "air-sick." Approximately, seven hours later, they landed in the New York area and were picked up by their older sister, Gloria, who had moved to New York City a couple of years earlier. Olga moved in with Gloria in Spanish Harlem on 110<sup>th</sup> Street. However, Gloria took my mother to 707 East 156<sup>th</sup> Street, Apartment 8 where my father's mother, Juana Rivera Mojica, and his sister, Rosalina Rivera, were living. About six months later, my father, Gregorio Rivera, arrived and he and my mother stayed in one of the three bedrooms in Apartment #8. The other two bedrooms were occupied by my aunt and grandmother.



In 1947, my older brother, Greg, Jr., was born and I followed in 1948. My parents wanted their own place and found a basement apartment across the street in a two story row house. The address was 740 Jackson Avenue and it was right next to the corner grocery store called "Laguna's." In those days, there was no park or housing projects. Jackson



Avenue just continued down to Westchester Avenue and consisted of private homes and apartment buildings. Across from the grocery store was "Polanco's" barber shop, complete with small tiles on the floor, old barber chairs and lots of witch hazel. Men used to get shaves at the barber shop back then and that would always include a hot towel to soften the beard. It was always fun to see the barber slap that leather belt hanging from the chair with the razor. When I was about one, I pinched my right thumb in the wrought iron gate outside of 740 and my parents called an ambulance. My prize for that adventure was a small scar.

About 1950, my aunt decided to return to Puerto Rico, so we took over the apartment and shared it with my grandmother. My aunt went by sea because she was afraid of flying. My parents had the corner bedroom, my grandmother was in the middle, and Greg and I took the bedroom that was off the living room. We

slept in bunk beds. It seems like we always had a dog and a cat in the apartment, but they seemed to get along - most of the time. In the mornings, breakfast was prepared by my mother or grandmother. Everything was made from scratch; nothing “instant” in those days. Around noon, one of them would start the preparations for dinner.

A few years later, I would watch my father go off to work in a suit, tie, and hat. All his suits and coats were in the hall closet right next to the bathroom. All the men wore hats back then and there was even a store that cleaned hats in the middle of the block between Jackson and Trinity. I figured he had an important job, but I never really thought much about it. Later on, when I was a teenager, I found out that he was an elevator operator in the garment center. I was surprised. He would get on the “E1” at Jackson Avenue and disappear. I think the company was called “Adams” something at 251 West 39<sup>th</sup> Street.

Sometimes he worked the lobby elevator and had a fancy uniform and other times he ran the freight elevator in the back, wearing coveralls. He was a card carrying member of Local 32B. Every now and then, he would bring my mother some material that “fell off the truck” and she would sew a new dress or curtains. Eventually, she took a job as a seamstress on Westchester Avenue near Prospect. The rent for apartment #8 was about \$32 per month; the phone number was Ludlow 5-3755; and the zone was 55.

## **HANGING OUT**

In 1953, when I was five, I went to kindergarten at PS 124. It was located at 160<sup>th</sup> Street and Tinton Avenue. For grades one through five, I attended PS 51 at 158<sup>th</sup> between Trinity and Jackson. During this time of my life, I made friends with other kids in the block and started “hanging out” on the street. This meant that during our free time, we would sit on the stoop, loiter in Castro’s candy store or play street games. There were no parks, computers, Internet, iPods, Xboxes, Play Stations, fast-food restaurants, cell phones, PDAs, etc. And yet, we had fun all day long, and our parents never worried about where we were. If they wanted us, all they had to do was open the window and yell out our names. It got to be embarrassing when I was a teenager, but I couldn’t get my mother to stop doing it.



We played marbles, tops, off-the-curb, Johnny on the pony, ringoleavio and box tag. We skated, rode bicycles, flew kites, ran through the back alleys, jumped from roof to roof, climbed up and down fire escapes, made fun of each other, and even got into a few fights. Jackson Avenue was unique because it was still the home base of a “gang” called the Rockets. The Rockets were “old” men, probably in their 20s; some lived on Jackson Avenue or nearby. Others were married with children and lived in the suburbs. Garcia worked for city sanitation and every now and then would come by in his truck and picked up our garbage. Bouncer worked for a private sanitation company. Jesus would just hang

around and one day, I was glad. When I was about 10, my parents bought me a red bicycle from Macy's. It was a "racer" with an exotic name like "Bianchi." Well, I was on the sidewalk, across the street earlier, one of my friends had let somebody ride his bike and he never came back. I said "No," even though he was bigger. He grabbed the handlebars and started shaking the bike to get me off. Jesus saw what was going on and came across the street yelling at that kid. The kid ran away, giving me dirty looks. I thanked Jesus, crossed the street and got back on Jackson Avenue. Tiger was another Rocket but I never knew what he did, he was just big.

The Rockets weren't bad; I never really knew anything about them when they were younger. They provided implicit protection for everyone on Jackson Avenue just because everyone knew that they still hung out there. I always felt safe. We played stickball against the Rockets. They would only play for money, so they would tell us that we had to raise a certain amount. We would all go back to our apartments to get a dollar or two and regroup to see how much we had gathered. If we had about \$20, the Rockets would play. It would start out fine, but if they were losing, they would begin to cheat. Eventually, they would win or stop playing because of a technicality and keep our money. This may sound rough but it was all in fun. We were trying to show them that we were replacing them, and they were saying, "Not yet." Sometimes, we would even make believe that we were going to fight them, but we would run, laughing, when they started chasing us. We ate hot dogs, Twinkies, candy, chocolate, popcorn, drank a ton of soda and never got fat. Why? Because we were always playing, running and jumping.



In 1957, I was surprised to see that I had a new brother, Bobby. When I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, I was skipped to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and wound up in the same class with my older brother, Greg. In 1958, I was identified as being intellectually gifted and was transferred to PS 48 on Spofford Avenue for 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I met different kids there with names like Murray Applebaum, Irving Finkel, David Miller and Ben Schwartz. I was introduced to matzo, gefilte fish and egg creams. Now, I was the only Puerto Rican in my class and things would never be the same. In 1959, the St. Mary's Park projects were completed and it included a park with,

among other things, handball and basketball courts.

On the weekends, we would be at the basketball courts in the early morning. We would play basketball until we lost to a better team and then we would call "next" on another court. Occasionally, I would play handball on one of the two courts. One of those older boys, who would call "next" on our court to beat us and take over the court, was Willie Worsley. Willie lived in the project building on the other side of the park. I would watch Willie and his friends play and see things that I had never seen before. Kids would come from other neighborhoods just to watch and learn. No-look passes, behind-the-back passes, pick and roll, weaves, head fakes, pass fakes, double pumps, hanging in the air

were all on display. Willie went on to play for DeWitt Clinton HS and after graduating in 1964, attended Texas Western. In 1966, Texas Western became the first all black team to win the NCAA championship. The movie, *Glory Road*, told their story.

We had men with horse drawn carts pass through selling fruits, vegetables, sharpen scissors and even deliver ice for the ice box. These guys would strap a refrigerator to their backs with a piece of burlap and walk up five flights of stairs. The neighborhood was so safe that we even had traveling salesmen knock on our door. My father bought two sets of encyclopedias – World Scope and World Book. He also purchased life insurance and a stereo system with two speakers that detached from the sides to create the stereo effect. He played his demo LP and the man that was talking walked from the left speaker to the right. Wow! I had to run to Woolworth's on Prospect Avenue to buy a 45 to test it because we didn't have any 45s in 1959. I bought Fabian's "Tiger." We never had a car, but we would always go to Orchard Beach in the summer. We would load up all the shopping bags and take the train to Pelham Bay, where we would catch the bus to the beach.



The boiler in 707 would always break down at least once during the coldest part of the winter. Sometimes, I would sleep in the living room on the sofa because it was warmer. I would wear a coat, hat, gloves and sweat socks. I would leave the light on to watch the mice come out at night. If you turned on the light in the kitchen at night, you would see cockroaches. In the morning, my mother would have the oven on for heat. She would also have pots of boiling water on the range. She would pour the boiling water into the bathtub and with a little cold water, I would take a bath.

In 1959, I was sent to a "Special Progress" (SP) class at Jordan L. Mott JHS 22 on 167<sup>th</sup> Street and Morris Avenue. These SP classes did three years of work in two. So I went from 7SP1 to 9SP1. In 1960, when I was 12, I was good enough to play on the school basketball team. I guess all that time I spent watching Willie paid off. In 1961, I entered DeWitt Clinton High School just like Willie. I was supposed to attend Morris High School, but after someone fired a shot through one of the windows, my parents found another school. I graduated with an academic diploma in 1964 at the tender age of 15, two years ahead of my older brother. Times were different back then for minorities and no one guided me at Clinton. My parents didn't have any money for college nor could they guide me. My father graduated from high school in Puerto Rico, but my mother never finished. So, a few months before graduation, I had no plans for my future. When someone asked me what I was going to do, I said that I would probably become an auto mechanic.

Well, I didn't. One of my mother's friends had a friend who was attending RCA Institutes on West 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. I checked into it and started classes that fall

majoring in Electrical Engineering. I got a job at the school so that I could pay the tuition. I also got a job pushing a hand truck in the garment center. In 1966, I transferred to CCNY but had to start in night school. In between, I worked as a clerk typist at Irvington House at the NYU Medical Center on East 34<sup>th</sup> Street. I also took computer operator training, but most of the jobs were at night. So, in October 1966, I got a job as a teller at Bankers Trust Company on Claremont Parkway and Third Avenue. So, I was working during the day and going to CCNY at night. As luck would have it, I took the required gym class in my first semester and the basketball coach saw me play. He asked me if I wanted to play on the CCNY night team. I said yes, but it was my downfall. I was doing too much. I finally decided to drop out of college because I was making \$80 a week at the bank and I was still living at home. I was loaded.

In 1968, I received “Greetings” from my local draft board, and they even sent me a subway token that I still have. The day I had to report to Whitehall, I got up early and tried not to wake anyone. Soon, my father was asking me if I wanted something to eat. Even Bobby got up. I left that morning in May of 1968 and walked through the projects to get to the Jackson Avenue train stop. When I turned around, my father was holding Bobby up by the window so he could see me. I wondered if I would ever return to 707. As it turned out, I did return (obviously), but I never lived there again.

Within a few days, I was at Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina. You know, I never realized the irony until I wrote this. Fort Jackson – Jackson Avenue! Coincidence? Maybe. I was trained as an infantryman and landed in Viet Nam on October 18, 1968. I served with the 2/28<sup>th</sup> (Black Lions) of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. I was wounded in May 1969 but completed my tour and returned home on October 18, 1969. I went back to the bank when I got out of the Army in May 1970. When I left, everything was “Ivy League.” I wasn’t ready for the “mod” scene but I jumped in. I wore bell bottoms, wide lapels and platform shoes. I let my hair grow down to my shoulders and even grew a beard. During the mid seventies, a coworker and I won the handball doubles championship of the Bankers Athletic League, five years in a row.

A couple of coworkers (tellers) and I were frustrated because we weren’t being promoted, while others were starting as customer service representatives at desks. We asked to meet with our manager after work to discuss this further over drinks. Our manager agreed and we went to the lower level lunchroom with a bottle of rum. Our manager was very clear and honest. She said that the reason we were not being promoted was because we did not have college degrees. Thank you, Mrs. Faison. After three years of getting Viet Nam out of my system, I enrolled at Bronx Community College in September 1973. I graduated with an AA degree in Management in 1976 and went to Baruch College. I graduated in 1979 with a BBA in Management after six years of night school. I continued my education when we moved to Maryland. After three years at George Washington University in Washington, DC, I earned an MBA specializing in Finance and Investments in 1987. I spent 30 years in banking and rose to the level of Vice President/Branch Manager.

In 1996, I left banking to try my luck in the IT field. In 1997, I became a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer; however, I accepted a position as Treasury Operations Officer with DC Government just in case. I never did go into the IT field, but it worked out well. I am currently the Acting Associate Treasurer for the Office of Finance and Treasury, DC Government.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

In 1979, Bobby convinced my parents that they should get together with me and buy a house. This was primarily due to the fact that Bobby's new car was being scratched while parked in the neighborhood. So, in August of 1979, we purchased a two family house with a finished basement at 2243 Chatterton Avenue. In 1984, I moved to Maryland and in 1995, my parents sold the house for a healthy profit. In 1995, after three months back in Puerto Rico, my father died. My mother is 80 years old and still lives in Caguas, Puerto Rico.

Growing up on Jackson Avenue in the '50s was special. The neighborhood was magical, full of adventure and relatively safe. People knew you and kept an eye on you. I never felt poor or disadvantaged until I was sent to schools in other neighborhoods. That's when I began to realize that I was different because I was Puerto Rican. But different didn't mean inferior, although it took years for me to realize that. Something that helped me build self-esteem and confidence was the few years that I spent in the Boy Scouts. The scoutmaster, Mr. Pratts, came to our apartment and spoke to our parents about the camping trips and the cost of the uniforms and equipment. I didn't think my father was going to approve, but he did. Greg and I spent the next few years learning the values of being a good scout and taking responsibility. We also went camping in New Jersey and upstate New York. Mr. Pratts was famous for saying, "No excuses." He was a great role model because he forced us to do things right, the first time. He was firm and I actually believed that this experience helped me adjust in the Army, especially Viet Nam.

My father would not use credit. If he didn't have the cash to buy something, he would save his money until he did. We would buy a 12-foot roll of linoleum, carry it on our shoulders and push it up the stairs to our apartment. Then he would trim it and place it on top of the old floor. It seems like every summer, we had to paint the apartment. He would bring home some paint, mix it with turpentine, and we would slap it on the walls. My mother didn't teach us Spanish because she wanted us to be Americanized. She emphasized school work and always made us finish our homework before we were allowed to play outside. My father would go to work even when he was sick. He did this for about 40 years at the same job until he retired.

The point that I'm trying to make, as I look back on my childhood, is that the most important contribution to a child's development is the role of the parents. If the parents are good role models and teach their children to develop themselves to the best of their ability, the chances are good that they will be successful in life. The neighborhood also plays an important role, but the key is what happens in the home. Times have changed

drastically for minorities over the last 40 years and now, the Internet provides immediate access to information that was unimaginable, 10 years ago. I had to take some wrong turns in life and wasted some time, but I obtained the information that I needed and persevered. I couldn't have done that if my parents had not taught me well. Give a kid a good home with caring parents and anything is possible.

*(George Rivera, center, and two neighborhood friends visited his old home during Habitat-NYC's dedication. Photo by Cheryl Sheridan/Inprints Photography)*



## **EPILOGUE**

I married my childhood sweetheart when I got back from Viet Nam and we had a son, George Anthony. I wasn't the same guy that I was before Viet Nam and we broke up within two years. George Anthony is a jet mechanic for the Outback Steakhouse chain. I remarried and have a daughter, Catarina, who is a senior at Duke and a son, Ricardo, who is a freshman at the University of Chicago. My daughter received a tuition scholarship and my son received a full scholarship with a stipend. Whatever wisdom I passed on to them was a product of what I learned from my parents and the "school of hard knocks." However, my wife, Marianela, who earned an MBA at the University of Rochester, deserves the credit for their success. She worked very hard to teach them the value of hard work in order to maximize their potential.