

(Some filler words have been removed for clarity. Transcription represents a best effort and best guesses are noted as “?” or “unsure”.)

Jose Chiu: I'm a storyteller. My name is Jose Chiu. I am 69 years old, and today is December the 11th, 2020, and we are in Concordia House.

Lynne Haynes: And I'm interviewing Jose. My name is Lynne Haynes. I am 53 years old, and today is December the 11th, 2020, and we are at Concordia House in Kirkwood, Missouri.

So Jose, tell me about life as you were growing up. Where did you grow up?

Jose: Well, I born in el centrales el Mita [?] in Cuba. It was a sugar plant factory that was in there, in the town where I was born. I grew up in there. I no have a childhood. I don't have any, because my earliest age I had to start doing for myself, working for myself to survive.

Lynne: Did you have brothers and sisters, or?

J: I have seven brothers and sisters. All of them stayed over in Cuba. No one wanted to come over here when I came. Was hard. My life was hard, real hard, because young, working, walk to the school, and this was my life. Like that, I grow up. And then, I was 27 years old –

L: 27 did you say?

J: Yes. I was in second year at college, but I was tired of the pressure from the government, hungry, and everything was a mess. And that's when I decided to come over here. My family no wanna come, but I came.

L: How did they feel about you coming?

J: They feel bad, but I had to, because I cannot take it no more.

L: Did you work at the sugar plant then?

J: Yes.

L: Is that where you worked? Okay.

J: I was working in the sugar plant for a little while, and then my father he opened a restaurant, and I was working in there, in the restaurant. Oh Lord. Hot all day long. in the kitchen. Well, anyway –

L: Were you a cook then, or?

J: Yes. Then, I decide to come over here. A group of twelve, we decide to find another way to come over here. And we find another guy going in a boat.

L: Now were you with, like, friends? Or who, when you say “we”, who were the, who went with you?

J: Friends. And we talking to him, he no want to come, but he found out we pay for the boat, we give it to have the boat before we came. And everybody give it to him a thousand pesos, no dollars. Pesos. And we get in the boat one night and get out of Cuba. In the middle of the sea, the motor of the boat broke down.

L: Oh no!

J: When the motorboat broke down we could not put it back together. And we was in the water for two days and two nights. We ran out of food. We ran out of water. Oh Lord.

L: How did you get there? Like, what did you, how did you move yourself?

J: We come away [motion] –

L: With your hands?

J: Paddle with the hands. Finally, we see the light, ‘cause somebody coming. And we start praying. Praying we say, we hope it cannot be the Coast Guard – Cuban Coast Guard – because if it’s them? Oh Lord. Probably I’d be dead now. But, when the boat get to us, it was the Coast Guard from here. Coast Guard from here. And they put us into the boat, and bring it to Key West.

L: What year was this?

J: ‘79

L: ‘79, okay.

J: Right there in Key West we were for half a day. They keeping us in there. From there they send us to Miami. In Miami they keep us for couple months, doing medical tests, checking out everywhere, you know. Give a child [?], and everything. They give you all kind of test, [unsure], and all of them. Then finally, after two months, they went, they told us, where do we want to go? What part of the United States we want to go?

L: Okay, they just said anywhere you want to go, you can go, kind of thing?

J: And then, no, they help you out to go where we want. And then few of my friends stayed in Miami, others went to California, others to New York, and I decide come over here.

L: Why here? [laughter]

J: Because when I got over there, I was hearing talking about St. Louis, Missouri. St. Louis, Missouri. And I wanted [to] know St. Louis, Missouri. And I come straight to here. And then when I get here, I don’t know why, because no English. And here I start going to the school to learn English. And then from there, they help me to get a job. I have a job. Oh Lord.

L: What was your first job here?

J: My first job here was working in a restaurant. I no want –

L: You knew that. You knew restaurant work right?

J: I no want it! I no want it, and I get out of there. And I went to a factory where they make gowns for wedding gowns, and party gowns, and all kinds of gowns like that. Yeah. I work in there for a few years, and after that I get out of there, and I went to another factory where they were, they were putting together clothes, to put a stamp, printing in the clothes, like the – you know, no one get one [?] here now.

L: Yeah, where it has like an emblem or something like a –

Other 1: A design.

J: Design. And then all what we were doing was for [unsure]. And I was there for about 4 years. From there I get out, and I start working in construction.

L: In where?

J: Construction.

Other 1: Oh, construction.

J: And then, after that I know, I remember I have two brothers in here from my father's side. But never I can find them, and I was all over around looking for them. Miami, Mississippi, Indiana, all over. And the funny thing, my wife, any time I get to one town, she already was there, and she leave when I get there. Or I was in one town, and she get there at the same time I leave. We were chasing each other. For all the years, like, all over around the United States.

Finally, I stop looking for them because I cannot find them. And I was living over here in North County with my girlfriend. And my wife was living in North County too. In the tall building in chamber [?] in – oh what was the street? I forget the street. A real tall building in there, round building, and the top has a restaurant, over there in North County. And then a friend of mine – she was living in the building, and a friend of mine they get a flea market right there too. And a friend of mine have a flea market, a booth, in there. And many times I was right there, helping ring in the booth. Yes. I don't know how many times. Who knows how many times she pass to me, or I pass to her in there. Well, as it was. Pass and pass and pass and pass...

I was in North County for about 9 or 10 years more. And then, I move into the City by myself, and she move over here to Rose Hill. And one day I get sick, and I had to stop work. And one day I call Call a Ride for I go to the doctor. Call a Ride, they're going to pick me up. And when the Call a Ride get there to pick me up, she was in the Call a Ride. And I look at her, and I say hi. She say hi. [laughter] Like, hi. The Call a Ride [motor noise], go. We get to the building where we're supposed to go, and I get out, and she get out too!

L: They were, you were both at the same doctor's office?

J: No. At the same doctor office building.

L: Same building, gotcha.

J: She go inside, but no talking. She go one way and I go the other way. When I get out and I saw her, the Call a Ride came, I'm glad. One year later, again, the Call a Ride, and she was in there! Oh Lord. And when I say hi, she give a look at me like that, she say I saw you before. I say, I know. [laughter]

L: Were you both going to the doctor's again?

J: Yes.

L: Oh my goodness.

J: And then, she walked one way in the building, and I walked the other way. When I through with my doctor, I coming down, she already was in the lobby, waiting for the Call a Ride to go home. Oh boy. And that's when we start talking and talking. We got talking about, I don't know, the [unsure] and the, why we went to see the doctor, and whatever. When, finally I get a piece of paper and I write my name and phone number and I give it to her, and she give me her phone number and says hey, no give it away, because the number is unlisted, and I no usually give it to nobody. I say okay no worry about. The Call a Ride came, but no was for her, was for me. And I left. When the Call a Ride come, the other Call a Ride came and pick up her, bring her to Rose Hill. When she get there, she get a message on the machine.

L: From you?

J: [laughter] Yes. Okay, I say, I calling you to see you make it back home. I want to know. If you wanna, you give me a call. You get my number. And nothing, nothing, nothing, she no call me, nothing. Well, few days later I call her. And we got talking on the phone, and we start talking and talking and talking. And then when we found out, 'cause wherever she was, I was right there, and wherever I was, she was behind me right there too. All over around. In 1998, October of 1998, I have a blood clot in my lung. And I was in [unsure] Hospital. And she was right there too!

L: No! For herself? She had something for herself?

J: Something for herself. She was in the hospital too!

L: Oh my goodness.

J: No, '96. October '96. In '98, I come back to the hospital. In October. When I was there, she was in there too! We was chasing each other for all our lives.

L: For sure, yes!

J: Well, anyway, we talking on the phone and talking on the phone. We would listen to baseball, Cardinals, and talk on the phone. And then finally, one day, she decided to come to visit me, to see where I live. And she came. She came. She spent the day with me, but nothing happened. [laughter] We was talking, I take her out to eat, outside. When she get there I fix breakfast for her, but for lunch, I take her out at restaurant to eat. We come back home, and then her daughter came to pick her up. And then, was 3 or 4 weeks later, she invited me to come over here to Rose Hill, and I came, and we start talking [noise]. And after that, I went [unsure] get it together, get it together. And we were together for four years. And after the four years, is when we get married. Is when, this picture coming out.

[Showing newspaper article]

We married in 2007, and this was 2008. That's when we get married. And she is remarkable lady. She a miracle lady. She was pancreatic cancer survivor, for 28 years. For 28 years. And when – and she get sick, and I have her in here, I don't want to take her [unsure], no only to the doctor when it's time. I no wanna, because I no want for she to go. Finally when the time came, was too much for me. And then, taking her to the hospice, Barnes-Jewish Hospital hospice, the place where the name is Evelyn's House. Real nice place, real nice. Over there, they take care of the people for their final days. The best. The best. 24 hour nursing, doctor 2 or 3 times a day was in there, volunteers came to check on us, pray, whatever. The room, every day they were cleaning, cleaning the room and changing the bed, every day. For anybody, 'cause the family cannot take care in the final days, this is the best place to be. This is the best place to be. And then, November the 14th, 2018 – no – 2019, at 6:00 in the morning, she take her last breath. I was right there with her.

L: That had to be really hard.

J: Yeah. November. November the 14th. December 27th... December 22nd... December 22nd, 2007 is when we get married. Real close, November to December. And then, New Year, Christmas, New Year, and then Valentine's Day, and then her birthday, April the 10th, all were too close. That Christmas I no did nothing. I no put nothing out, no nothing in my apartment. But this Christmas, I already did something. I put something on my door, inside I've got a Christmas tree up, and her picture right there by the Christmas tree. And then, then I hear [unsure] people, especially this one over there behind me [laughter] –

Other 1: You didn't tell her how feisty Ruby was.

J: Huh?

Other 1: You didn't tell her how feisty Ruby was.

J: Oh. [laughter] Oh.

Other 1: You made her sound like she was nice and quiet.

J: No, she no was quiet. She no was quiet.

Other 1: She kept you on the straight and narrow.

J: She would open her mouth. She would open her mouth.

Other 1: That's right, she would.

J: But, everybody like her. Everybody.

L: So you, did you live at Rose Hill with her then?

J: Yes.

L: And so how did you come to Concordia House?

J: Oh, I missed a part, oh.

Other 1: You forgot the Nashville.

J: We were living in Rose Hill, and then all the family, her family, moved, was in Nashville. Nashville, Tennessee. And we moved over there.

L: With her family?

J: Yeah, yeah. And we were there, and we spent 5 or 6 years over there.

L: Okay.

J: And then we get a [unsure], have baby. And after that time, her family start moving out.

L: Oh dear.

J: And we start getting along, and then we decide come back here. And then with the help of a friend, a granddaughter, through the computer, find a place, and then get in contact with Pam. And Pam mailed to us application. We fill it out, and mail it back to her. And we were waiting. The waiting list was for a year.

L: Oh my!

J: After a year, the phone ring. "Hey, we're getting apartment ready for you. The best in the house." [laughter] I say, what you mean the best in the house? They say, because in one side you got the trash bin, in the other side you get the laundromat. [laughter]

Other 1: Did you get your laundry done yet?

J: No, I've been waiting for you!

Other 1: No! I'm not doing your laundry. [laughter]

Other 2: You took wonderful care of Ruby.

L: Yeah.

Other 1: He did, very good care of her.

Other 3: And she was so pretty! Always, she was so pretty. From her fingernails, her hair, you know, toenails and beautiful sandals.

Other 2: They would take her across the street for her nails and hair.

J: Her thing is her nails and her hair. [laughter] Oh, and her jewelry.

Other 1: Oh yeah.

J: All kind of jewelry.

Other 1: She had to have her jewelry.

L: So how long was she sick?

J: Huh?

L: How long was she sick before...

J: Well she was sick for about 2 or 3 years. She start going down, down, down...

L: Gotcha. So you were her caretaker for a long time.

J: Oh yeah. When I – It's what they say, for better or for worse. I get the better, and I had to take the worse.

Other 3: So he was spoiling her, and he was spoiling Precious. His two women.

L: His two women.

J: I was in the middle. I was in the middle of two girls.

L: And they got the best deal out of it, right? They got the best care. So Jose, do you have any contact with your family in Cuba anymore, or?

J: Sometimes. For long time I don't get communication with them. I was planning now, in January, make a letter, and send it to them. See [if] I get a response.

L: Have you ever been back?

J: No!

L: Yeah, I wouldn't think so but I just was curious.

J: I think I no come back. Because if I come back, I'm scared Castro [noise] grab me, and no let me came. Because I escape from over there, you know? I get out of there illegal. And it's a punishment over there, a really bad punish.

Other 2: We want you to stay here.

L: Absolutely.

Other 1: What did you say, we want him to stay here? Is that what you said?

Other 2: Yes.

Other 1: I'm not gonna put my opinion in on that one. [laughter]

L: It sounds like you've never regretted your choice to come here, is that right?

J: No.

L: So do you have any words of wisdom or anything like that, that you would like to, that you want to share, or any last thoughts that you have about, life or anything? Like your life motto or your life, what am I looking for?

Other 3: Philosophy?

L: Philosophy or something like that, anything like that?

J: My life in here, no was easy, but no was worse either. Okay? I have a good time, and I have a bad time. And then, here the second building I live in, I find so many funny people. [laughter] In pain they manage, I no call help for pain [?], I call for help for [unsure] everybody. I don't know why. Everybody like me.

L: They do, I can tell that.

J: And I like everybody.

L: Alright. Well I guess I will end this, but thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

J: You're welcome. You're welcome.

Other 2: Jose how – [interference]

J: - 10 or 11 year old.

Other 2: Were you? So you were going to school and working.

J: Yeah.

Other 2: But living at home?

J: Yes, sometimes.

Other 2: Sometimes?

J: Sometimes.

Other 2: That had to be scary for a kid.

J: Sometimes I had to run away, because most of the time they were waiting for their payday. Sometimes my family were waiting for their payday.

Other 2: From you?

J: Yeah, waiting for me with the payday.

Other 3: But they – where you the oldest? Youngest? In the middle?

J: Yeah. No matter who was.

Other 3: No but, were you the oldest?

J: No I in the middle.

Other 3: But so all the kids worked?

J: Some of them yes, some no. Most of them no was doing nothing. Only going to the school.

Other 2: Now what was your religion in Cuba?

J: Catholic.

Other 2: Were you Catholic?

J: Cuban people most – all Cuban people, most all over are Catholic. Ah, not all over, not all over, are most.

Other 2: But how can they live under Castro being Catholic? I mean he doesn't seem to have a heart.

J: When Castro, he close down the church.

Other 2: Okay.

J: The church it was undercover.

Other 2: Okay. Otherwise you would be persecuted if you tried to go to church?

J: Yes. Finally, finally when the Pope decide to go and visit Cuba, is when Castro open all the church. For just a day.

Other 2: Just a day.

J: Open to all the church, preachers everywhere. Reverends everywhere. And the people coming out with a Bible in their hands, and nobody say nothing. The police, no nothing. After the Pope left, the police manipulate [?], the church did open but, not too much congregation. Had to be a small congregation.

Other 2: That's really sad.

J: And the food over there. Castro, get a ration for everybody. You cannot go to the store and buy the food you want. You had to get what they give to you. The mainly food over there in Cuba is rice, beans, and meat. Rice they give you for one peso. For one peso, five pounds of rice. For the whole month. Beans, two pounds. Meat, no more than two pounds every week.

L: So were you hungry?

J: Everybody was hungry. But many was on the black market. To get things.

Other 3: Could you have chickens and eat eggs?

J: Yeah. Then many would raise chickens. Make a garden, for the vegetables, and raise chickens to get eggs, raise pigs, goat. And then the ones living in the country, they can raise cows to get milk. Not to kill and eat the cow, but to get the milk. And when they had to kill one cow, they had to take it to the butcher place, and give it to them, for they can kill it and take the meat, and give it to the meat market, and sell a little bit to everyone.

Other 2: Is it a beautiful country?

J: Huh?

Other 2: Is Cuba a beautiful country?

J: Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. Is little, but beautiful. And when Castro get there, he mess it up. He mess it up. All around the south of Cuba get a lot of beach. Long, real long, long beach, beautiful. You might hear about the beach by the name Varadero.

Other 2: I haven't heard of it.

J: Varadero is in Havana. It's a beautiful beach. Coming all over around, [unsure] get a beautiful, beautiful beach. Beautiful countryside, mountains. Beautiful. Wildlife, not dangerous. No dangerous animals.

Other 2: That's unusual.

J: Yeah. We no get poisonous snakes over there. The only one bad over there is the scorpion. But the scorpion no kill you. They bite you and keep you for one or two weeks and you won't feel it, won't feel the pain.

Other 2: Really?

J: Yes. And then the only big animal over there was the alligator.

L: Oh, okay!

J: Alligator, plain alligator.

L: Did you see many? Did you see them in the wild, or did you just know they were there?

J: Everybody can see it in the wild, but the government made a real big fence all over around, for they can no [unsure] outside. But lot of alligators.

Other 3: So you couldn't go swimming then?

J: Not where they are. Not where the alligators are, because they could eat you.

Other 3: Are they only in one area?

J: Yes.

Other 3: So you could go swimming in – there was a safe area?

J: Yeah. In the river, on the beach, you can swim in.

L: Did – was there tourism? Did people come to visit Cuba? Like, especially back then I don't think Americans could, right?

J: Yeah. Some people were going over there to visit Cuba, but they cannot go wherever they wanna go.

L: I see, okay.

J: They had to go where they take them. Because when the boat or the plane get there, you get out, take you to the one building, and give you all the instructions, and give to you – They say, this person will guide you all over around, and tell you what about. And this person will take you to the nice buildings, nice museums, nice [unsure], but they no will give you to the poor area.

Other 3: But this is after Castro, right?

J: Yeah!

Other 3: So before, people –

J: Before, before Castro, anybody, before they go I'll say – visiting, going to Cuba first, to go to other countries. Cuba first. Why, Cuba was so beautiful. And then the climate. Sometimes you have a no – it's not cold like here. You see the little jacket? You can wear it all year, in the winter over there.

Other 3: But, I want to ask you something. So, Ruby is not Cuban.

J: No.

Other 3: What nationality was she?

J: Portuguese.

Other 3: Portuguese?

J: Yeah.

L: Oh really?

Other 3: So was she born in Portugal?

J: No, she born in here. She born here in United States.

Other 3: So did she speak Portuguese?

J: No. Mom and daddy, pure Portuguese.

L: Did they move from Portugal to here then –

J: Yes.

L: - after they got married?

J: Mom and daddy, her mom and daddy, yes. They move here, and they make her here, and she born here.

Other 2: So did Ruby learn Spanish?

J: No. She never no wanna know. Only the bad words. [laughter]

Other 2: Never directed at you, I'm sure.

J: Huh?

Other 2: Never directed at you, I'm sure.

Other 3: So did she cook Portuguese food?

J: She cook whatever she can, no matter where from.

L: Do you cook? Are you a good cook?

Other 3: Well, are you?

J: Ye – [laughter] Yes.

L: Well you worked in a restaurant, so I was just – do you like to cook?

J: I'm tired to cook for everybody. I cook for me. [laughter]

L: Oh gotcha. You like to cook for you?

J: Yeah.

L: Okay. I understand that.