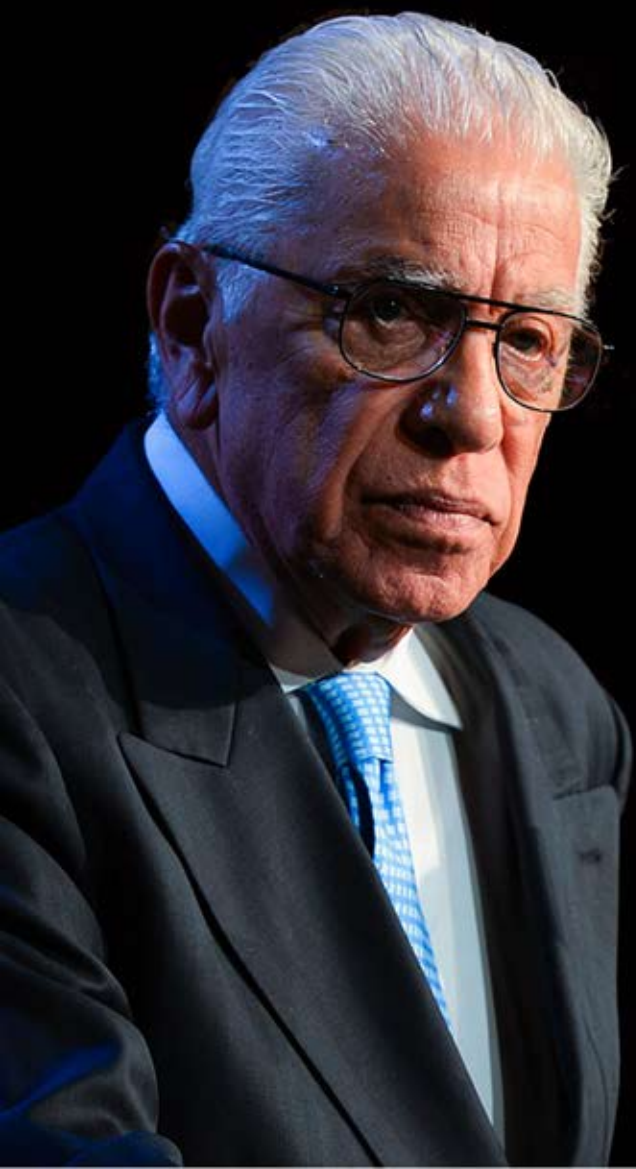


# MAN OF THE PEOPLE

The Autobiography of Congressman  
ROBERT GARCIA



## **Praise for Robert Garcia**

“Congressman Robert Garcia was a trailblazer in public service and a champion for Latino communities in New York and across our nation. I am proud to have called him a friend. He devoted his life to fighting for equality and advocating for his community, and I am eternally grateful for the contributions he made while in public office that continue to inspire each of us.”

—*Congressman Adriano de Jesús Espaillat Rodríguez, U.S. Representative for New York's 13th Congressional District, the first Dominican American and first formerly undocumented immigrant to ever serve in Congress.*



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The Autobiography of  
Congressman Robert Garcia

Robert Garcia



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Recovering the past, creating the future

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*To the people of the Bronx . . .  
past, present and future.*



## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> by Jane Lee Garcia .....	ix
<b>Prologue</b> by Bill Richardson .....	xv
<b>Preface</b> by Robert Garcia .....	xix
<b>Chapter One</b>	
My Puerto Rican Roots .....	1
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
Growing Up in the South Bronx .....	4
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
Called to Service: Military and Public .....	18
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
Winning my Stripes in New York Politics .....	31
<b>Chapter Five</b>	
Mr. Garcia Goes to Congress .....	49
<b>Chapter Six</b>	
Jane .....	71
Photos .....	80
<b>Chapter Seven</b>	
Of Elections and the New “Hispanic” Census .....	87



<b>Chapter Eight</b>	
Friends and Personages .....	106
<b>Chapter Nine</b>	
Wedtech .....	117
<b>Chapter Ten</b>	
Puerto Rico .....	129
<b>Epilogue</b> by Jane Lee Garcia .....	149
<b>Index</b> .....	163

## Acknowledgements

This autobiography is being published posthumously, and it therefore falls on me to acknowledge those dear people, friends and family who made its writing over the final thirteen years of Bob Garcia's life on Earth the truly rich experience it has been.

Before a word is written, or a thought committed to paper, there needs to be a reason for putting it in writing. Bob was a man of action, on a mission of public service, and it took a while for him to be convinced that he had something worthwhile to say for posterity. He was not one to write lengthy political treatises; he'd rather tell a story of Everyman to inspire subsequent generations to consider Public Service as a noble career. He himself felt this calling was akin to a religious vocation, a sacred calling, and he wanted young people to feel that calling as well.

Throughout his twenty-five years in public life, Bob never missed a graduation in his district and often went beyond those commencements to speak to young people wherever he possibly could. His speech was always along the lines of his own personal story with the clear message: "Don't let anyone tell you that because you came from the Bronx, or because of the color of your skin, you aren't worthy to aspire to lead our Nation! You are as good as anyone else, and this country needs YOU to serve! I did it in spite of the odds . . . and so can you."

*Raúl Yzaguirre.* Perhaps the person most responsible for convincing Bob to finally get down to writing his story was the pioneer-

ing Hispanic civil rights leader Raúl Yzaguirre, founder of the National Council of La Raza (now UnidosUS). In no uncertain terms he told Bob, “Bobby, you simply must write your story for the purpose of historical integrity. If you don’t, someone else will, and you will have lost your voice . . . and we need that voice.” This was just the push-start that Bob needed after Rudy Giuliani engineered the politically motivated indictment that dragged us both through seven years of degrading publicity and the two trials that ended in both winning our appeals. Raúl was a constant friend, and Bob heeded his good advice; we were both grateful to him. Thank you, dear friend.

*Justice Sonia Sotomayor.* In another context, the final push to get his book going happened during a small dinner party at a friend’s home attended by another Bronxite, the Honorable Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who had recently been appointed to the US Supreme Court. Sitting across from Bob, she leaned forward and told him, “Bob, a lot of the success we have in life depends on being in the right place and at the right time in history. We all stand on someone else’s shoulders who opened the door of possibilities for us. You opened doors for me and many others . . . and you need to tell people your story. Please write the book.” These were words he took to heart as that very week he committed himself to the task. You, dear friend, were certainly the right person, with the right words, at the right time in the history of this book, and we are forever indebted.

*Loretta Phelps de Córdova.* The actual task of getting Bob’s story on paper (more accurately, on computer) first fell to a friend of mine from early adulthood in Puerto Rico: Loretta Phelps de Córdova, a PhD, author and historian. Loretta had married my schoolmate and then Judge Roberto Córdova and had moved to the island where we became friends. She had eventually moved back to the States and was living in Centerville, a small town near our home in Middleburg, Virginia, where Bob and I were adapting to a kind of retirement from public life. Over the course of several years, Bob would make his notes with care at home and then, several times a week, would drive to her home, where he spent a good part of the mornings or afternoons with her. Without your expert guidance, Loretta, there would be, simply put, no book. Thank you for your professional dedication

and friendship; you, too, were certainly the right person, there at the right time in history, for us.

*Bob's doctors.* By November of 2012, it had become apparent that Bob's health was in decline. His medical team at George Washington University Hospital—Dr. Charles Faselis, head of internal medicine, and Dr. Guillermo Gutiérrez, head of the department of pulmonology, met with us and strongly recommended we move from Virginia to a warm climate as soon as possible to give Bob the best quality of life. Over the Christmas holidays, we decided to go to Puerto Rico for several weeks to take a break from the cold and damp weather. Bob's breathing noticeably improved immediately after arriving, leading us to make the commitment to move as soon as possible and make Puerto Rico our new home.

When we returned to Virginia, we began downsizing and packing up a big house to fit into an apartment. Both Dr. Faselis and Dr. Gutiérrez were invaluable in setting up his medical care with a strong team at the Veterans Hospital in Puerto Rico. Dr. Gutiérrez collaborated with the Head of Pulmonary Care Dr. Hiram Rodríguez and Dr. Juan Carlos Martínez González, who took over as his internal medicine doctor. The personal attention and excellent VA facilities on the island literally kept Bob going until the latter part of 2016, when he was admitted for his final hospitalization in December, passing on January 25, 2017, two weeks after his 84<sup>th</sup> birthday. Thank you all for your kind care and friendship over those final years. Without you, there would have been only the shadow of Bob's story, as it was in those last five years you made possible that he personally reworked and added to this autobiography.

*Ron Rosenberg and Patricia Molther-Rosenberg.* Even before moving to Puerto Rico we both already had many friends, and even some family, with whom we had kept in touch with over the years. In fact, one of my best friends on earth, Patricia and her husband, Ron, were instrumental in helping us find our wonderful new home in the same building they lived in, the Torre de la Reina condominium. The salt air breeze from the Atlantic Ocean and Muñoz Rivera Park across from El Escambrón Beach in San Juan was an ideal location; we were able to rent one of the building's several penthous-

es . . . and with an open-ended lease! The large open terrace (we installed a flagpole and flew the Stars and Stripes 24/7) became our favorite site for working on the book. It felt like home, and having Pat close by was very comforting, as she was a source of encouragement in flagging moments. Thank you both for your friendship and encouraging support.

*Manny Casiano.* Another key to Bob successfully focusing on the task at hand was Manny's invitation for Bob to share an office at San Juan-based Casiano Communications, the largest US Hispanic-owned publisher of magazines and periodicals in the United States, which had started out as one of the very first area business publications in 1975 and was the region's weekly "business bible" for forty-three years: *Caribbean Business*. The company's founder, CEO and publisher, Manuel "Manny" Casiano, was a longtime friend of Bob's going back to their early years in New York. Following the sale of his successful, bi-coastal, special-effects film company—he had won several technical Emmy Awards—Manny and his wife Nora had moved to Puerto Rico in the early 1970s at the invitation of industrialist and then Governor of Puerto Rico, Don Luis A. Ferré, who appointed him to head Fomento, the island's agency in charge of promoting job creation. For a man like Bob, now retired, it was a great feeling to put on a suit and tie several times a week and "go to the office." It helped get his brain in gear! Thank you, Manny and Nora, for your unwavering faith in Bob, as well as your tangible help and friendship over the years. It was at Casiano Communications that Bob met the person who pulled the whole book together and helped Bob organize it into a readable story . . . the confluence of yet another "someone being in the right place at the right time."

*Nicholas Karahalios.* With a wealth of experience in economic development, marketing and media, Chicago native Nicholas Karahalios had been working for Manny as a marketing expert on various occasions since 1985. He is also an excellent wordsmith and helped greatly by reorganizing and editing the original manuscript for publication. Nick became a dear friend and is to this day serving as secretary of the non-profit "Congressman Robert Garcia Legacy Fund." I am personally most grateful for his past and continuing work in pro-

moting Bob's autobiography as well as taking it to the next level as a documentary film, which will follow as another facet of Bob's legacy project. Bob and Nick spent many hours in their shared office at Casiano Communications. So I was not surprised when, among the final instructions Bob gave me in the last few weeks before his passing, he said: "Jane, stay close to Nick, you can trust him. He is very smart"—something I've never had cause to doubt.

*Governor Bill Richardson.* One of the beneficiaries of the work and vision of Bob Garcia's accomplishments in connection with the 1980 census was that it soon doubled the number of Hispanics in Congress, up from the four that had then made up the newly formed Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), of which Bob was a member. Four new Hispanics were elected, among them Bill Richardson of New Mexico. Bill caught Bob's attention and he immediately prevailed on Bill to take over as chairman of the CHC Institute, a position that Bob had chaired for almost four years. That prompted a tongue-in-cheek rebuke from Bob's closest friend in Congress and part of the New York Delegation, Charlie Rangel. "Hey, Bob, what are you? Crazy? You don't make a new freshman a chair of anything! He hasn't paid his dues here yet!" To which Bob responded, "But he's really very smart, Charlie!" Bill quickly proved Bob right, going on to be elected governor of New Mexico and appointed ambassador to the United Nations, as well as special envoy and the successful mediator in the release of American hostages in many parts of the world. Thank you, Bill, for the friendship and unwavering faith you and Barb always had during our darkest days. Thank you as well for your eloquent words dedicated to Bob in your gracious "Prologue" to this book. You knew his worth, understood his vision and were always ready to help Bob. I am proud to count you as a dear friend.

*Dr. Félix Matos.* When Bob decided to resign from his congressional seat in 1990, he arranged to leave the official papers from his entire twenty-five years in public service—from the NY State Assembly and Senate as well as Congress—to Hunter College, part of the CUNY System. The reasoning was that there was already the nucleus of a dedicated Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, and he

was, after all, a proud Puerto Rican New Yorker (Nuyoricana). It felt natural and Dr. Félix Matos, Chancellor of CUNY, was instrumental in reaching this decision and facilitating the process. Most recently, Dr. Matos was the direct link to the University of Houston's Arte Público Press, which is publishing this book, and to its director, Dr. Nicolás Kanellos. Thank you, dear Felo, for your firm belief that Bob's story needed to be published for future generations and for going out of your way to help make it happen.

*Roberto Sancho.* Nothing happens without money. The vehicle to facilitate the publication and dissemination of Bob's inspiring story and legacy to students, as well as to ultimately provide scholarships to those pursuing a career in public policy, was the creation of the non-profit Congressman Robert Garcia Legacy Fund. Its advisory board is a reflection of the many friends who supported and loved Bob in his life and career over the years. While all have been active contributors to the legacy project's ongoing existence, I do need to single out Roberto Sancho of Bronx Lebanon Hospital for its continuing support and generous donations over the past four years, giving us the operating funds to get things done. Thank you, Bob, for all the help that allowed us to get the book edited for publication as well as to undertake the first efforts toward the documentary film.

Finally, to our blended family, I add my heartfelt thanks to those in Bob's "Preface." To all our children for just being there for us both during all these years. As his heirs, in many ways you were always his true motivation! God bless you all.

Jane Lee Garcia  
President  
Congressman Robert Garcia Legacy Fund, Inc.

## Prologue

Bob Garcia's memoir reflects a life of struggle and achievement. His kind of leadership grew and was tested first in the poor, rough streets of the South Bronx and then in the cold, muddy fields of Korea, before arriving at the New York Senate and the US House of Representatives.

This work traces his youth and manhood in details we can marvel at. His community ties together the island of Puerto Rico and the City of New York into what Bob proudly calls his Nuyorican heritage. His father works hard at his job and weekends at a storefront church. His mother saves their small income to buy Easter clothes and is savvy enough to run her hand over her teenage son's arms as a hug, making sure there are no needle tracks in those days of drugs and violence in the neighborhood. She signs the consent for him to volunteer for the US Army when he is only seventeen years old. In distant Korea, he shivers in combat and vows to become a pastor like his sister, should he live. He returns to the brilliant lights of Broadway and the enticing chance to study with the GI Bill, get a good job and go places in the world.

The young man works, marries and starts a family, while beginning politics in the very best way: at ground level, person to person. Bob enters the civil rights movement with an energy and commitment to the cause, up and down the tenement stairs, garnering votes for John F. Kennedy in the Democratic Convention, talking and listening to the populace and then bursting into the limelight as he's chosen to run on the Democratic ticket for the New York Assembly.



From there to minority leader (Democrat) in the New York Senate, learning the intricate unwritten and written rules of negotiating and legislating, Bob continually grows in stature. By now he is a beloved figure in the South Bronx and an adept practitioner of the difficult art of politics. Everyone in Albany and the City of New York seems to know and respect him. His official presence at the Attica prison riots moves him to work further at prisoner rehabilitation.

His rise to national Hispanic leadership mirrors the incredible feat of gaining his seat to Congress in the teeth of entrenched control of a Democratic borough boss, who puts his own favorite on the party ticket. Shockingly, the Republicans allow him to run on their side, and Bob overthrows the will of the boss, gains the votes of the electorate and goes on to join the Democratic caucus in Congress. I don't think that has been done before.

Once in Congress, he immediately surges to leadership, skillfully using the US Census and various committees to lead the charge for the Black and Hispanic Caucus, bringing it into the twentieth century. He works hard for civil rights, not only in his own country, but at the international level.

More than a decade later, suffering an indictment and then winning appellate court exoneration, Bob retires from Congress and continues forward in the community. The caucus grows at many levels, always supported by Bob. Forty years later, the Congressional Hispanic Coalition Institute (CHCI) is now a non-partisan, non-profit organization, an effective powerhouse to provide congressional internships and stimulate Hispanic participation in civic life.

Bob and his wife Jane (whose dynamic presence in the Hispanic cultural scene is well known) receive plaudits from the CHCI. He continues work in congressional relations and Christian Fellowship.

My mother was Mexican and my father American, so I grew up with a different kind of bicultural background. When I first met Bob, I was beginning my own electoral story. He had crisscrossed the country, including Puerto Rico, holding dozens of hearings to promote Hispanic participation in the 1980 census. That work directly influenced the redistricting of congressional representation and gave

New Mexico another position in the House of Representatives. I won it.

As a much-respected congressman, Bob helped me on many issues as I was getting my feet wet. In the midst of some turmoil, Bob drafted me to take his place as leader of the burgeoning Hispanic Caucus in Congress, which, thanks to him, was cooperating with the Blacks in the House. I continued my work in government at high levels, including cabinet positions and, most recently, as governor of New Mexico. I know first-hand the galvanizing importance of Bob Garcia.

I agree with Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, another and younger distinguished citizen from the Bronx, who told him, “You must tell your story, Bobby. You are one of the reasons I’m here today. You’ve been a pioneer for my generation.”

Here’s his story, ably told by Bob himself. . . .

Read it!

Bill Richardson  
Governor of New Mexico 2003-2011  
Former US Ambassador to the United Nations  
Former US Secretary of Energy during the Clinton Administration

September 25, 2018



## Preface

Each person has his own tale. This is mine. I want to share my story here: what I owe to my beloved country, the United States, with all its promise and pitfalls, its extraordinary and enduring reality of a living Bill of Rights. To my old neighborhood, the South Bronx, crowded tenements and vital, tough, loving people. To the island my parents called home, Puerto Rico, lush, green and beautiful, struggling with poverty and a colonial sense of inferiority, while harboring a traditional greatness of heart. And to my family, my first wife Anita Medina, who, like me, was a product of the South Bronx in the 1940s and '50s, who gave me my two sons Robert William and Kenneth Ralph, and my adopted daughter Rosalind. To Jane, my wife of thirty-six years and the four children that came into my life with her: Edward, Robert and Caroline Power and Kirsten Marie Matos. We surely don't make our paths alone.

Looking back at my life, I realize how deeply I am my father's son. His honesty and passion to help others, to bring people together, to follow Christ's path . . . those qualities I've tried to make my own. Of course, I have my own zest for life. All these together have driven me to my life's work to seek equality for those less blessed by fortune, while seeking my personal happiness and success in the world. When I first ran for the New York State Assembly, under the original Voting Rights Act passed in 1964, it was a time when all minority groups were seeking equality and political empowerment. I am proud to have been one of the leaders who pioneered this movement and helped lead the way for those who came after me.

In the electoral year of 2012, we Hispanics made our mark both as voters and leaders in the community. Let me tell you how this poor Nuyoricano (New York Puerto Rican) kid, now a man who's old in age and young at heart, has seen the mountains and the valleys of experience and has had a wonderful time through it all.

This isn't a sociological dissertation, to be sure. I do however want to share with the reader a story of my life of struggle and faith and joy throughout bad and good times. I am delighted to have represented my beloved South Bronx in the extraordinary and challenging world of the New York Legislature and the US Congress. From learning how to hustle on the street with stickball, I had to learn how to hustle in the give-and-take of the Republican-dominated state legislature and then in the Democratic caucuses in the US House of Representatives. In NATO I rubbed shoulders with world leaders and helped make policy decisions. I learned to listen to the other guy, to give an honest opinion with discretion and leadership. It's always about making your word your bond.

This is also a story reflecting my Puerto Rican roots and seeing the changes and challenges of both my ancestral island and my own United States, my love for all things Hispanic, my special appreciation for people of color, my exuberant enthusiasm for sharing with others of all backgrounds, my deep interest in observing and analyzing politics and being involved in policy making while undoubtedly enjoying the so-called "good life" of what the material world can offer. Underlying all this is a bedrock belief in the Christian God and the transformational power of Jesus Christ in our daily lives, as well as my passion to measure up to what Christ demands of me on a daily basis. It's always a challenge.

## CHAPTER ONE

### My Puerto Rican Roots

My dad's father was a Spanish soldier from Álava in the northern Basque region of Spain who was stationed in what was then Spain's colony in the Caribbean: Puerto Rico. Like so many of his fellow Spaniards, he fled to hide in the mountains when the Americans invaded the island in 1898 during the Spanish-American War. He eventually ended up in the town of Coamo, Puerto Rico, not too far from the biggest city on the southern coast and its center of commerce, Ponce. I remember his mother, who visited us when I was a child in New York, as a dark-skinned and wrinkled old woman with straight black hair. She made me think of the island's Taíno indians, smoking her little cigar and looking at me with intense dark black eyes. She radiated heart. It's funny how childhood impressions stamp the memory and don't necessarily capture what the world considers to be reality. Just recently I saw a picture of my grandmother with my parents and me, and she doesn't look that way at all. She's just a well-dressed, white-skinned, serious middle-aged lady. Where was that dark-skinned Taíno matriarch that I remembered? Where had she gone? It makes me wonder about all our memories. . . .

My dad, Rafael, whose Garcia-González surname reflected both his father's and mother's lineage in the Puerto Rican and Spanish style, was born and grew up in the green-hilled town of Coamo. It was, and still is, a farming and cattle area, but also a kind of local resort due to its hot springs and a natural spa. My father had four siblings: Pablo (my godfather), Sixto, Rufina and Suncha. By the way,

the island's governor elected in 2012 is a García (Alejandro García Padilla), from Coamo too, and some of my family claim kinship. Be that as it may, everyone in Puerto Rico seems to be related somehow: a cousin of a cousin or next-door neighbor of a great aunt or something of the sort.

My father got a job at the Central Aguirre, a huge sugarcane mill on the southern coast between Guayama and Ponce. Sugar cultivation, controlled by local and stateside monopolies, drove the island's economy in those days. "King Sugar" they called it. Although once regarded as producing the coffee "of kings and popes," coffee plantations in the mountains had suffered from a series of hurricanes. Sugar, and rum distilled from sugar molasses, picked up the slack while the low-paid, hard-worked cane cutters, not unlike cotton pickers in the South, brought in the coastal cash crop. Many of the companies that owned the mills were headquartered in New England.

My dad's job wasn't great, but he was fortunate to have it. I don't know exactly what he did in the mill, but he told us that at least he didn't have to wield a machete to cut cane in the densely planted, rat-infested fields, like his brother Pablo. In the mill, they ground and pressed the cut cane stalks to produce sugar, molasses and bagasse. Dad told us later that he'd walk back and forth to his home in Coamo on the weekends with food from the company store for his mother. It was a journey of many miles between the coast and the foothills. He was healthy and strong, despite the prevalence of parasitical anemia and tropical diseases. Just eating enough and surviving was hard, but he managed.

My mom, Rosa Rodríguez Roche, was born on the south coast in the poor neighborhood of La Playa de Ponce. It was, and still is, a low-lying swampy area facing the Caribbean Sea. By now the contaminated waters of the mangroves have been fairly well cleaned up, but it was polluted for many years and filled with shacks. Mom's parents died when she was young, and their sweet, lovely dark-eyed girl and her sisters were brought up by various relatives in La Playa, where each family was poorer than the next. She sometimes didn't know where she'd be sleeping at night, as she was moved from one family to the next, and that kind of upbringing gave her a lifelong

feeling of insecurity. In spite of that unsettled upbringing, her sisters were good to her, and she grew into a kind, good woman who became a loving wife and mother. Even so, she was subject to occasional bouts of depression. She leaned on my older sister Aimee, who always had an inner strength that fortified our whole family.

Many years later, I would spend the night at my maternal aunt Estefanía's little wooden house there on Guadalupe Street in La Playa de Ponce, just down the street from the convent of my friend Sor Isolina Ferré, daughter of a wealthy Ponce family and sister of industrialist and future governor Luis A. Ferré. Sister Isolina became a caring godmother to the Puerto Ricans in the South Bronx and later returned to her native city, where she founded a world-renowned community center for the poor. Another neighbor born on the same street was a poor but strong boy called José "Chegui" Torres, who became a light heavyweight champion boxer.

The first time I slept in that Playa neighborhood of little houses, shanties and mangroves, it was under a mosquito net and, believe me, the protection was really needed! Imagine how it must have been in my mother's day, with mosquitoes out of control spreading malaria among the tuberculosis-ridden poor. I think of my mother's childhood in those harsh conditions and am happy that she was able to have a comfortable old age as a widow living with Aimee in Rockland County, north of New York City, and that she'd also had the chance to own her own home in the Santa Monica neighborhood of Bayamón, close to the capital city of San Juan.

How did my parents, those poor young people who hardly spoke English, ever get it together and find the courage to set off for New York? They had only a few years of public school, no money and no job prospects on the mainland. It took audacity and bravery to leave for the unknown. How I admire them . . . and all who have dared to begin their lives anew in the United States!