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**Oral History Interview with Ricardo Osmondo Francis  
Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.101**

**Interview conducted by Rebecca Jacobs on June 13th, 2014 in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn.**

REBECCA JACOBS: [00:00:00] This is Rebecca Jacobs. It's June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014. I'm here with Ricardo Francis. Ricardo, can you introduce yourself for the recorder?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Hi, I am Ricardo Osmondo Francis. I am an artist and curator. I live in Jersey City, but I work on my projects, exhibits, and/or shows here, both in Brooklyn and in Manhattan. For the most part. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: And we're in Brooklyn in Prospect Heights today, doing this interview for the Brooklyn Historical Society, Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations project. So, let's get started off with some questions about just your background. A little about when and where you were born. So, when and where you were born?

RICARDO FRANCIS: I was born on [date redacted for privacy] in Houston, Texas. My mother is black American, and she's from Chicago, originally. And my father is Panamanian, and he was born in Colón, Panama. And if I'm not mistaken, he ended up working for the US -- through the US Army on the canal, and that's how he came here. And they met in Brooklyn. She was in grad school -- she's a social worker, but she was in grad school. I forget the school that she was at, but they met at a party, here in Brooklyn. And he was working for Con Ed, as an engineer, and that's how they met. And through, I believe, her mother, or my grandmother, persuaded her to move back to Houston. Just so you know, my mother was the only child, an adopted child of my grandmother and grandfather, Ed and Ruth [Simmons], who are both deceased, but... So, they -- it was harder for, I think, my grandmother to let go of her -- of my mother.

REBECCA JACOBS: The only child?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Only child, and she was adopted, because my grandmother couldn't have children.

REBECCA JACOBS: So, what was your mother -- what's your mother's name?

RICARDO FRANCIS: My mother's name is [Portia] Simmons Francis.

REBECCA JACOBS: And your father's name?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Is Ricardo Francis.

REBECCA JACOBS: Ricardo Francis.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK, so --

RICARDO FRANCIS: So I'm a Junior. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: That's great. So, I'd love to hear about -- a little about your grandparents, your mother's parents, and their background, and...

RICARDO FRANCIS: With my mother's parents, they -- I'm trying to remember. I know that my biological grandfather is from Detroit. And if I'm not mistaken, my biological grandmother is also from Detroit as well. And they were high school sweethearts, and they had a child out of wedlock, which ended up being my mother. And so, they decided that it was best to give her up for adoption. And that, of course, became a -- an issue, I think, with my biological grandmother. She basically did not want to accept the fact of my mother being in existence. I'm not sure why. It's a long story with that. I'm not sure why that is the case. At least... Shortly before my biological grandfather passed away, we had the pleasure -- my sister and myself, and my mother, after she spent years trying to find him, found him. He was, at the time, he was in the hospital, dying of emphysema. And we finally got to meet him. And oddly enough, he was a mortician. That was his trade. So, imagine being a -- I think -- how old was I? Twelve? Imagine being at a -- his place was literally a -- right on top of a funeral home. That's where he lived. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow. And so you were 12 when you met your biological grandfather for the first time.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes, yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: And so you -- did you learn more about them after he had passed away, or...?

RICARDO FRANCIS: I think I -- think I got to know a lot about him through conversation. Just through speaking to him, and I mean, there were more facts of course that came afterwards, but it was more [00:05:00] interesting to hear it directly from him.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: You know? Sometimes, to get the real deal, the real narrative, it's best to hear it, as they say, from the horse's mouth, rather than from hearsay, or other people, or even sometimes, if it's written down. But directly speaking to the individual. And I think he gave a more real testimony of why what happened happened. And he, at least, was apologetic about all of what took place between my mother and he and her mother. So... (pause)

REBECCA JACOBS: Sorry for that quick pause, just making a quick adjustment. Wow, so that's really moving that you met them. And now -- and that he was apologetic. And that doesn't always happen when -- you know, adoption. And what about your adoptive grandparents that your mother was raised with?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Again, their name is -- actually, just for, in terms of names, my biological grandfather is -- his name is Warner [Cosley]. That's his name. The biological grandmother, I never remember her name. You have to ask my mother that question. And she's all the way in Texas, so that would be a bit difficult. But in terms of my adoptive grandparents, their names was Ed -- Eddie and Ruth Simmons. And what I do know about them -- well, when I was born, I would not o-- I believe at the time, like I was able to register who people were, and that kind of thing, as a kid. He was already -- already had Alzheimer's, so he was a bit out of it a great deal of the time, unfortunately. What I do remember of him is that he was always very jovial in his own way. It was unfortunate to see him declining, in terms of his health, but I think that he tried to enjoy every day as best he could. I do remember my grandmother really being sort of the backbone of the family. And doing everything from cleaning to cooking to making sure my sister and I got up and had breakfast and dinner, and went to school, and this, that, and the other. And my mother did what most, I think, single mothers did. You know, she worked. And I think for -- actually for a long time, she was a social worker, but her specialty was adoption. So, she sometimes would take my sister and I on trips into -- either around Houston, or sometimes, like, we would take two- or three-hour trips outside of Houston to, like -- I didn't know where we were, half the time. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: But, like, we would go on to do case studies, and it was basically like, she would do a check-up on children she'd placed in particular people's homes. And just did an update on you know, how they were, and what the environment was like for them, and this, that, and the other. But it was very interesting. Most of the -- actually, all of the time. Not even most of the time -- all of the time, when people spoke of my mother, in terms of what she did, in terms of being a social worker with adoption, she was like -- they would be like, you know, "If it wasn't for your mother, I would not have the joy of having --" whichever, you know, child was placed with them. And I saw that as I think one of my first lessons in what humanity is. And I thought that that was something that -- it was special for me. And you could -- you know, it's like when you -- when people say they could -- they experience joy or whatnot. It's great to see that, you know, because I think a lot of times, kids grow up in the most dire situations or places. And I can at least say that, for me, I was very lucky to see a lot of the good aspects of existence, through my growing up.

REBECCA JACOBS: Through your mother and your grandparents?

RICARDO FRANCIS: And my (inaudible) yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: And so, your grandmother, did she ever talk to you about the -- adopting your mother, and [00:10:00] that experience?

RICARDO FRANCIS: That's a great question, actually. Well, what -- she never explained that to me. My mother -- my grandmother and I had a sort of an unusual relationship in the aspect of, in many ways, she regarded me almost as her son, rather than my mother. My mother and I do have a -- I would say a good relationship. I think the difference, though, is that, in terms of the understanding of the virtues of life and existence, I got more of that through my grandmother than I did of my mother. And it's funny, like, I think once I -- I think a few years ago, when I really began to think about relationships I have with people, I realized that, looking back at my upbringing, that a lot of how I shaped who am as a person was really more through my grandmother. And I just think it was the aspect of circumstance. I mean, like, my mother worked a lot. And -- what is the term? Latchkey child?

REBECCA JACOBS: Mm-hmm.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. Well, I think that a -- and I think a lot of friends of mine went through the same thing. It's like, another family member was there, more so than the actual parent or parents. And I don't think -- I don't put that against my mother, by any means. It's just what happened.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah. So, what -- were your grandparents -- did they look like you? Your adoptive grandparents? Or did they --

RICARDO FRANCIS: No.

REBECCA JACOBS: No.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Mm-mmm.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK.

RICARDO FRANCIS: It was interesting. My mother, I remember that at around eight or nine years old, my mother explained why she left my father.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Then she explained also the story of when my grandmother told her when she was adopted, and she had told her when she was 17 years old.

REBECCA JACOBS: Oh, really?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. So, of course, I could never -- you know, I have a big mouth, so I always -- I either always asked, or questioned everything or people, or whatnot. And I was like, "Well, don't you think that that was a bit harsh? I mean, it's like, she could have told you when you were younger. It would have been an easier pill to swallow, I think." And she agreed with me on that. But she said, you know, "She chose to tell me at this time, and I did become very depressed over it."

REBECCA JACOBS: When you were around nine? Eight or --

RICARDO FRANCIS: No, well, she -- she was depressed over that. And that's -- and she explained, that's the reason why she wanted to do adoption.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK.

RICARDO FRANCIS: To sort of right a wrong that she felt that was done to her.

REBECCA JACOBS: Oh, your mother wanted to --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes.

REBECCA JACOBS: -- be a social worker working on adoption?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. I mean, I think that probably was there even before that story. But that situation -- that happened. But I think that just sort of was icing on the cake. Or, you know, it was like a -- like a, what is it? Like adding more gasoline to that fire that's already there, in terms of her going and doing something she felt was necessarily for her. So...

REBECCA JACOBS: So your mother didn't know she was adopted until she was 17?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes.

REBECCA JACOBS: Uh-huh. Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: And so, were there sort of cultural things, growing up that you remember, like food, or religious aspects with your grandmother and mother?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Well, we -- my sister and I grew up Baptist. And for me... Deep in my spirit, I don't -- I never identified with it. I went along with it, because it was -- for me, I sort of saw it as that, this is the thing to do, just continue. My big dream was to always move to New York. That was always there (laughs) in my head, to move to New York, to leave Texas. And I would -- remember vividly -- luckily there was a library at home. My grandma was always about education. She was very supportive of that. So, for me, I would spend hours reading, going through encyclopedias, especially looking at different countries and how people lived elsewhere. And in my head, I'm thinking, I would love to experience what it's like to be in Europe, or to be in Asia, or to be in Africa, and just at least [00:15:00] be there for a short time, and know what it's like to experience how other people exist. That was -- that was always there, to some degree. But I mean, growing up in the church, I would say that you see the hypocrisy in humanity by -- well, at least for me, in terms of how I was -- how I grew up -- you see the hypocrisy of humanity by going to church. And you know, and I'm not trying to make a statement that church is a bad place to be. I think that -- there was one minister that I must say, I had complete respect for. I think I was a teenager when I met him, and I was part of that church for about three or four years, if I'm not mistaken. But I was a teenager at that time. But he was the only one that I -- he seemed to truly live by example. And I think that he was not afraid to talk about the aspects of human error. I think that he really embraced that and

that was part of his -- part of his teachings to his flock. But the others, you know, they say, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," yet the minister is with mistresses, and giving -- or embezzling money, and -- you know...

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Different other things that has nothing to do with the church. And this was also the age, in the '80s of Jimmy Falwell -- was it Jimmy Falwell, or Jimmy Swaggart? I get them all confused.

REBECCA JACOBS: Jerry Falwell?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Jerry Falwell, yes, and Jimmy Swaggart, and I remember vividly when he said, "I have sinned against you," and -- and then it was -- what is it? The taking of the money, and the -- all the mistresses. (laughing; inaudible) (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: So this wasn't exactly strengthening your faith?

RICARDO FRANCIS: It was -- it was not. But I always believed in a higher power. And to this day, I believe God exists. But it -- this may sound funny, and I told people this all the time, is, like, God to me, is like when I was growing up, and it was like the last television show. And it had the National Anthem, and then the TV would go blank. And it had, like, the pixels. That, to me, is what God is, visually. Just --

REBECCA JACOBS: No, that's cool.

RICARDO FRANCIS: -- I -- yeah. Just a -- just sort of a -- what was it? A flat screen of pixels. And you can make him or her or whatever wherever you wish for it to be. But I do believe that God does not condone all of the misdeeds of mankind to each other in his name. That I've never believed. So all of the killing and the -- the... The aspect of crime and misdeeds, and just misfortune. All of that really is man-made. And that is unfortunately the truth of people, and I've come to realize that, and one thing that I think God gave all of us is free will. We could either be good or we could be evil, or bad, or whatnot. So he gives us that -- that -- that choice, and -- but, for whatever way you wish to go, you have to pay for it. There's nothing in life - there's always a price for everything. So, that's the, sort of the -- that's how I view spirituality or religion, if you want to call it that. I don't believe in organized religion. I have a lot of issues with that, because man will always corrupt it. A lot of the aspects of it, in terms of the principles,

are great principles. And even all the three major religions, or whatnot, there's great principles in all of them. But of course, you put a person in power, you're always going to have some level of misdeed and mistrust that happens.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: So.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah. So I guess -- I liked talking about your experience as a child growing up with religion. I realized maybe before we get too much into your childhood, a bit more we should talk about any memories you have of your father or not, and sort of your father, which we didn't really discuss yet. So...

RICARDO FRANCIS: He -- if I'm not mistaken, because a lot of things was kept from me. (laughs) I think a lot of things are kept from a lot of -- a lot of kids. But [00:20:00] he did win the right, through court, to have visitation rights. So, there was some -- there were some weekends, you know, I would go there, and -- to the best of my ability, I could say that he and I had a pretty OK relationship. I think that one thing I could say I liked about him is that he treated more -- in terms of his style of parenting, more as a friend than as a son. I think a lot of times there's been debate on how children should be raised. Some parents feel it's probably better to treat them more as like a best friend. And then others are like, well, no, you have to be -- you know, a parental -- you always have to have a parental presence, and there always has to be that boundary of, "I'm in charge and you're to follow," and this, that, and the other. But his -- his style was more as a buddy kind of situation. My issue with him is that he was not consistent with that. I wanted a relationship with him, and I think because my mother and he had a very difficult past -- and he didn't like the fact that she just up and left -- which I'm glad she did, but -- (laughs) based on his philandering. But you know, she just up and left, and he always held that against her. So I think that a lot of times, he -- that became like the reason why he, for the most part, especially towards the end of our sort of getting to know each other through the visitations, were not interested. It just sort of stopped. I think the visitation period was roughly maybe two years. And I think by age nine, I remember waiting for him to pick me up to stay with him for the weekend, and he never did. And that was the last I saw of him. So in my mind, I chose to just put it in a box and keep it there.

Because it was just easier to -- I think people are... What's the term? It's -- they become bitter by the choices of family, friends, this, that, and the other. And I've realized that people make choices all the time, and a lot of times, those choices are not the correct choices, in terms of dealing with certain situations and with certain people. You know. And I think with forgiveness, it's about taking -- looking at everything neutrally, or as neutral as you can. And then saying, how do we come to a healthy conclusion to move forward, and to just let whatever happened just -- you know, we try to correct it, and we try to move on from there. And I think most people don't understand how to do that. And I would -- I'm not sure where I learned how to do that. But maybe it was -- I would probably say maybe it was -- oddly enough through my grandmother. I think she -- she was funny, in terms of, like, she had issues with a lot of people and a lot of things. But at the same time, I think that she knew how to -- she was a very strong individual. And I think she knew for the greater good that sometimes it's best to just say, "Forget it." Move on. So, for me, I think that I learned from her how to deal with him, in terms of just -- just let it be. There is more to life than worrying about a relationship that may not have been the best or may not be worth delving more into, because the other person doesn't want that with you. You know. But there were some good times with him. I think my first time ever seeing Michael Jackson's "Thriller" was with him. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: It was a good movie.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. He had a -- someone that he was seeing -- her name was Myrtle. And I really liked her as a person. She gave me a lot of proverbs about life and existence. And I remember having some great dinners with him and her. And one thing she told me about -- [00:25:00] we had an interesting conversation about women, actually. And she said, she doesn't understand why people think that makeup is a great thing. And I was like, "Well, what do you mean by that?" Mind you, I probably was a seven- or eight-year-old, and we're (laughing) having this conversation. And she said, "Real beauty is in the inside of the person. And a woman is really more beautiful without all of the makeup, not with this -- all of that stuff -- all of the lipstick, and the eye shadow, and this, that, and the other. It's basically making them into a caricature of themselves." And I thought about that. Actually, I thought about that for quite some time, and I realized that

she was right. But I took that a step further, and really thought of -- that could really be said about even men, too, to a certain degree. And the issue of makeup goes beyond that. It's just attire, it's the aspect of how people wish to project themselves to others. And I think a lot of times, people project themselves as a character that they feel that people will accept and better as than what is really there. So I think one of the things -- and I think this has probably a lot to do with spirituality is, I've always -- even -- I would say, even as a kid, I'm more interested in the reality of the individual than the surface that they present to me. I think also, because I chose at age four to be an artist -- believe it or not, that was a willful decision. I just was -- some may call me crazy for saying that. But it's like, at age four, I knew consciously that I was to be an artist. To what exact degree, don't -- I didn't never really knew. But I just knew that I wanted to draw.

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And luckily, I was -- both my mother and grandmother supported me with that. So it was the -- there was a lot of after-school programs. And art teachers in school noticed that I really had a real, you know, connection to drawing, and to the best of their abilities, you know, really helped aid me or guide me with that. But always -- and eventually, that went on into... There was a fifth-grade teacher. His name was James Woods. He was a singer. And he wanted to create a boys' choir. I went to -- one of the elementary schools that was very close to where I lived what called [Lockhart] Elementary. And so, he created a boys' choir. And I think that was the first time I saw a male figure that was almost like a father. And there was a certain level of discipline. He was very, like, hard-nosed, in many way. And for me, I think that children need people that are very structured in that way. He was also my fifth-grade teacher, which (laughs) is --

REBECCA JACOBS: So you saw him often?

RICARDO FRANCIS: -- so imagine, it's like you have him; and he was a very, very -- he was always about discipline, and he was always about, if you're going to make it in life, you have to be ready for what people throw at you. So imagine being told that at fifth grade. But it's true. And ironically, that was also my grandmother's view of people, too. She's

like, “You know, you’re black, and you’re a man. And you’re going to have to work twice as hard as other people. And that’s just the unfortunate aspect of how it is for you.” I never, though -- what I will say, though, before I get back into the aspect of Mr. Woods -- being black was never an issue for me. I think for a lot of people, being black, and even being a man can be very difficult. But I chose not to have that as an issue. And I think that I’ve survived life better by not allowing that to be an issue. [00:30:00] I don’t want to be bitter, and I don’t want to be angry. To me, being bitter and angry gets you nowhere, and it will just -- keeps you always in the same situation. So, in terms of the aspect of my Panamanian heritage, that was kind of an odd situation for me. I did not understand why. So of course, with my mother, I’d be like, “Why him? Couldn’t you have just been with an American?” And -- I think it was an issue of trying to understand why my name was Ricardo. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: And did you identify with that heritage, or not, or do you?

RICARDO FRANCIS: I do. Now. But it was -- I don’t think I came to peace with it until much later in life, like really, really in peace with it. I, I think, understood the aspect of it, for the most part, when I was growing up. I understood that it was just two people were in love with each other. Or thought they were in love with each other. (laughs) At a point in time, and whatnot. But... But in terms of the real, like, for me, identifying, it wasn’t until much later in life, where it was like, I think, more came together. And that was -- and I think that the really -- the biggest piece with that was trying to -- was -- I had to learn Spanish. And it’s still a process. Of course, it’s harder to learn at -- later in life than it is if you were a kid, and that was one of my little fiefdoms with my father, was that, you know, he wasn’t around to teach me these things. (laughs) But you know, as with anyone, it’s best that one learns to do something on their own, rather than to wait for someone else to do it for you.

REBECCA JACOBS: I think we’re just going to pause for one sec while --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Sure.

REBECCA JACOBS: -- the sanitation truck passes. (laughter) Let’s just -- (laughs) (pause; loud noise) OK.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Thank you. You read my mind.

REBECCA JACOBS: So... We're just pausing for one sec. OK. I definitely want to get back -- so you were frustrated that your father didn't teach you Spanish?

RICARDO FRANCIS: I was more frustrated with the aspect that he just wasn't there, period. But I think that, you know, it -- I just like, in terms of when you think about it, it's like, oh, damn, if he as around, I would know more about what Panama was like. Or, I would have known Spanish. I would have had a deeper connection. And the irony is that, when I moved to New York, you know, especially here in Brooklyn, there is a big Panamanian enclave here. So, I began to -- I think being here in New York, I began to see right away the many people that you studied about as a kid, or had either curiosity, or some level of inquiry about. I got to see them and deal with them directly, here. So...

REBECCA JACOBS: So, yeah, because when you were a kid, you would read the, you know --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: -- encyclopedia about people from all over the world.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: And that's really interesting that, as a kid, you knew you were an artist, and you also knew you wanted to move to New York at a very young age.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: That's really interesting. To talk a little more about childhood, and then I'd love to get into the sort of New York, and learning Spanish and more recent sort of way in which your identity has changed in some ways. Did you have any siblings?

RICARDO FRANCIS: I'm -- oh, yes, I have a sister. She's two years younger than I am.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK. And is -- was she -- does she have the same father as you?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK. And where -- and how was that, growing up with your sister?

RICARDO FRANCIS: It's funny, she and I have a -- our relationship is not a standard brother-and-sister relationship. I think that -- in this particular [00:35:00] situation, I don't wish to go too -- too much into it. I would say that we have a good relationship. I think there were some moments as we were growing up, where there was tension. But I think we worked through all of that, and now that we -- we have a real understanding for each other, and she gives some great advice to me, and I feel that, you know, I could do

that with her as well. But that was just a lot of -- it was some hurdles we had to get through, in terms of understanding each other a bit. But you know, and for the most part, though, she's -- even when we were growing up, it was a pretty -- it was, in many respects, a smooth childhood together. She was doing her own, thing, I was doing my own thing. (laughs) You know what I mean?

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And I don't think that there -- I'm not sure if there was a sibling rivalry of any sort, or whatnot. Sometimes that happens or whatnot. I'm not - I don't think that that was the case here. I just think that there were some things that happened, and we kind of were apart at times. But we -- I think we worked through that.

REBECCA JACOBS: Great.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: I'm wondering -- I'm kind of interested -- did you hear stories from your grandmother and grandfather that -- your -- the ones who adopted you, who you were close to -- about any of their memories? I mean, it's interesting that your grandmother said, "You're a black man, you're going to have to deal with this challenge." Did she have sort of relatives who had been through things, or see your grandfather going through things, or why --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Well, she -- I found out more... It's ironic with people. You find out more through other people than through the person (laughs) themselves. She actually was in many ways, directly part of the civil rights movement.

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And so, I remember this one story vividly. My mother told me this, that she -- that Martin Luther King had came to Houston, and there were some meetings with area local ministers or whatnot, and there were protests and this, that, and the other, and so on and so forth. So one thing she did was, she organized a dinner, at her place. And Martin Luther King actually came there with -- you know, he usually had a entourage with him, of course.

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And she had made -- she had made the dinner for him. And from what -- and I had the great, what is it? Honor of having her cooking, uh -- pretty much every day. But he was very complimentary to her food. And it was just -- oh, again, a story I heard from my mother, and when I asked my grandmother about it, she just sort of laughed, and was like, "Yeah, it's true." (laughs) That was pretty much her explanation. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow, I'm glad I asked that question.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. But I think she -- she had it hard, from what I've heard. Her life was hard, and I think somet-- and not to sound horrendous, but I think she had it probably harder from other black people than -- and her family, than others. And that's the thing about, if you want to talk about the aspect of racism, a lot of times -- and this is something that people do not talk about every often, is that a lot of times racism is an inbred issue within the same group of people. And it's -- you know, I think that if you're going to talk about it, it's always the white man against the black man, or white man against Latinos, or white man against (inaudible) or Amer-- white, male Americans or white, female Americans against anyone that's -- or the Christian right against anyone else that's coming into the US. But no one likes to talk about how each other points the finger, and will say, you know, derogatory things towards each other. And the more I found out more about my grandmother, the more I saw that that was the dynamic that was in her own existence. And I think that that was something that she did not like to talk about. She did not like to go too far into that. I think that [00:40:00] as much as she wanted to get me to see the world for what it is, she hid a lot, as well. And I don't think it's out of embarrassment, I think it's the aspect of, she did not want me to be bitter. And sometimes keeping information -- I don't -- I personally don't feel that she should have done that. But I think that, in her -- in her mind, she felt that that was the best way to -- to deal with the subject.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: It's to kind of keep certain parts of it closed.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: To protect you, to a degree.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: Or something. Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: Well, that's really interesting. So, if you want to talk more about the community you grew up in. So you grew up in Houston, Texas.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Mm-hmm.

REBECCA JACOBS: Memories, from neighbors, or school, at a young age. It sounds like you have some really vivid early memories.

RICARDO FRANCIS: I do. People -- I do want to say this about the South. People -- and I've heard this many times. People from New York, or in the tri-state area that, oh my God, you grew up in Texas, that must have been horrible, and it's the South, and it must have been racist. And I'm like, to be quite honest, it's like, I never remember my childhood being all that bad, in terms of racism. There were moments of that. But they were minor in comparison to some of the aspects I've seen here. I think that, especially in many cases, New York has a sort of silent segregation. And people know what it is. But it's not really talked about, too much. It's like, it's the same -- it's the aspect of, if you're a person of color in the Upper East Side, at a certain time, you shouldn't be there. Or, if you're in a particular neighborhood in almost any part of the city, there are particular people that are only there. So, if you're someone different, and you're in that neighborhood, especially in this day and time, in the present, there is the belief that -- of white people are moving in then, that rent is going to go up. And all the yuppies are moving in, and then we're all going to be kicked out. And also that could be said about just -- that seems to -- and in fact, I think that seems to be the dynamic now that is here. And it's interesting, in some of the -- in a lot of the conversations with people about neighborhoods in the area, some -- a lot of them are mixed. But at the same time, again, the aspect of you in that neighborhood, or these people in that neighborhood, that -- why is that? Or, you know, that that seems bizarre that he or she is in that neighborhood. How can they, when only these people are there? So, I find it strange, again, when the issue of people believe that being from Houston, Texas, that it was -- I went through this

horrendous, or horrible, racial problem. I really didn't. You know? Not that being here in New York was really difficult either. It's just that, it's -- I think it's a bit unfair, the -- the stereotypes that are given about the South, in terms of the aspect of racism. I find that, a lot of times, New Yorkers, especially if you don't know them, are very jaded. And almost are, like, the don't register simple things, like "hello," or "good morning," or "good afternoon," or "thank you." And I -- in the South, that's expected. You go into any place, any [subway station] or the gas station, or bakery, or store, and people are like, "Hello, how are you?" And like, they're very happy to -- and they don't necessarily know you. They could be from a completely different group or race of people, but it's typically, in many instances what hap-- instances, rather, what happens. But here, it's almost like you have to know that person for a while for them to open up. And, as the old saying goes, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." I never made that as a issue of, oh, like I have problems with New Yorkers or whatnot. To me, I just thought it was an interesting quirk that's part of the aspect of being here. I do generally find New Yorkers to be, believe it or not, very nice people. They're definitely not Bostonians, that's for sure. (laughs) Which, they are -- they're a trip, in many ways, (laughing) for me, personally, [00:45:00] but -- but no, I find most New Yorkers to be very kind and -- in their own way.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And they are -- I think especially once -- when 9/11 happened, and certain other things happened, or, like when the blackout in 2003 happened, everyone forgets they're in their bubble and they are -- they work as a collective. And that's one of the beautiful things about being here, is that that sense of -- of, what is it? Being a team, is definitely seen.

REBECCA JACOBS: It comes out occasionally.

RICARDO FRANCIS: It definitely does.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. And I'm not sure -- and I think in most other cities, that would happen to some degree, but here it's a kind of an interesting -- it's very special -- and I'm lucky, very lucky I got to witness that. And unfortunately some of the situations

were not the best for people, but, like, I would say the last time was Hurricane Sandy.

Which was what, I think maybe --

REBECCA JACOBS: Two years ago?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Two or three -- maybe -- yeah, about two years ago. That was -- that was, again, a time where people, again, got out of being in their own bubble, and just --

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: -- we're going to get through this, and work together. And if I can just think, the whole tri-state area do that. That, to me, is very commendable, and shows a lot about -- I do believe that New York is a great place for just about anyone to come and to deal with -- for at least a short time in their life, even if you're just here for a few months, just to experience it. It is no place on this planet like it. And it's truly the melting pot of the world, and you -- I remember my first year being here, I hated being here a great deal. I thought it just was too much, it was too difficult. You don't have any money. You know, it was -- and people -- and I felt like I was being stabbed in the back by a lot of people. People that I thought were friends, but they were not.

REBECCA JACOBS: And when was this, when you first --

RICARDO FRANCIS: I moved here three months after graduating from college at -- in Baltimore. I moved here August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And I lived in -- where was it? It's off of Linden -- was it Linden Avenue or Boulevard? Linden Boulevard, I think. In the projects. I cannot remember the name of the projects, but it's off of Linden Boulevard. And it was through a so-called friend, who was (laughs) -- I stayed with his aunt, and I was there for about nine months. She was difficult. And he ended up being difficult as well. And unfortunately through -- I remember I had only \$300 to my name. And I had -- I had to make a choice. It was like, either do this now, or sit and wait another year, here in Baltimore, and be bored. At least that's where my mind was thinking, at the time. Because I think the plan was, was that I was going to stay in Baltimore for a year, work, and build up my portfolio to do grad school. To continue with my art degree, or to get a graduate, as a -- or my, I would

say my MFA or whatnot, here in New York. So that was the plan. But after three months, I was like, I just -- I want to move. I was -- I'm ready to move. So I made plans to move here. And so the plan to move here, I think was, when I look back at it now, was a bit rushed, and a bit too idealistic.

REBECCA JACOBS: Because you had wanted to move to New York since you were a child, and --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah. And I do want to get -- we'll talk a little more about childhood. But to continue this.

RICARDO FRANCIS: So I moved -- I got in a Ryder truck, I loaded it up; got in it, and... I vividly remember there were two songs on the radio that played so many times. The Backstreet Boys, "*I want it that way*," (laughs) and Aliyah's song, "*Are you that somebody*." Those two songs, for some strange reason, were played so many times. And I think I had a moment of just, like, [00:50:00] complete -- it was of -- I felt like I was accomplish-- of accomplishment when I was on 95 coming into New York, and I saw the skyline. And I've seen it before, in traveling here, to either visit friends while I was in college or whatnot. But this was pivotal, because it was myself. And I was actually going to be here for good, or whatnot. But I experienced driving around in New York, which wasn't too -- it wasn't as bad as I expected. And -- but I was sort of good things, sort of in terms of the story, to get it, more quickly go through things or whatnot. But I was there --

REBECCA JACOBS: Oh, sorry.

RICARDO FRANCIS: -- for... I was there for, like nine months. And it was an interesting experience. I think I learned a lot about how to trust people, and how to be very mindful of how people are, or how people can be. So I look back at -- I don't have any bitterness over the little, to me, sort of silly, minor things that happened. I think that -- I wish I had a job when I moved here. I did not. I had to find a job, and I literally beat the pavement. I would go into places, I'd ask if they needed someone. And I was very lucky that I would say within two weeks, I found a job working at Sam Goody, when it was still in business. And the same manager that was at Sam Goody, he ended up leaving

that job, and I ended up working with him for The Wiz, when it was still in business. (laughs) And -- in Brooklyn, on -- near -- in King's Plaza. Yeah. So, Brooklyn was, in many ways, the -- my world, at that time. Like, if I had to go to Manhattan, it had to be for something special, either it was to hang out, or maybe for a special event, or whatnot. But in terms of financially, it was very, very difficult. It was just like -- it was like, well - - and I was -- and I began to hear, like, well, your first year here is going to be a hard one. And it was true.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: By almost the end of the year, I was this close to wanting to move back to Texas with my family. And all of a sudden, everything changed.

REBECCA JACOBS: It worked out?

RICARDO FRANCIS: It worked out. I had a very great conversation with -- I forget the woman's name, but she worked at Sony Music Studios. And she said, "Oh, there's a particular department there in client services, where, you know, you're dealing directly with the artists, with ordering food, and drinks, and just catering, basically, or whatnot. And they're always looking for people." And so, I said to her, "Oh, that'd be -- that sounds wonderful. You know, who do I talk to? Who do I send my resume to, or whatnot, and..." I was -- I had asked -- actually, I was pretty persistent with that, because I thought it just sounded cool, and sure enough, I ended up starting there part-time. And then within three months, I was there full-time. And that was my primary job for, I would say, the next eight years of me being here. And after -- I lived in Brooklyn -- again, I lived in Brooklyn for nine months in one spot. And then I ended up moving out through a co-worker, not at Sony, but at -- when I was still at Sam Goody. It was with her boyfriend, who had a place on [Kaiten] Avenue. Near Prospect Park. And I actually really liked that area a lot. I just thought it was like a great mix of people. You had -- part of the neighborhood was, like, Hasidic Jews, and then the other part was Indians. And a little bit of everyone else in between, (laughs) as well, in certain pockets. And just was like, wow, like, this is, to me, really New York, in many ways, and whatnot. But the problem with that situation was, I was literally -- and I remember this vividly now. I would give them \$100 -- this was very cheap rent, mind you. I was like, if -- when I told

this story, people are like, “Oh, my God, you paid \$100 a month? To live there?” I was like, “Trust me, you’ve been in my shoes.” (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah, with New York, you win some, you lose some, right?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah, yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: So, struggles [00:55:00] in the one way...

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. But what’s funny is that the guy wasn’t paying his rent at all. So I was giving him - thank goodness it was only \$100, but I mean, he wasn’t paying his rent, and I remember one day, a City Marshall, and the landlord came by, and said -- the City Marshall was like, “You all -- you have half an hour to get all your stuff and leave.” And I was like, (laughs) well, one, this is not my place. I’m renting from the owner of this apartment. And by this time, the apartment was having a lot of structural issues or whatnot. Like, literally, it was like, it was not really worth staying there anymore anyway. So, I explained my situation best I could. And it was -- this probably will sound a bit sensitive for anyone that’s listening to this. The owner, who was a Hasidic Jewish guy, he said to me, he’s like -- you know, he was like, “Who are you?” And I’m like -- explained it well — “My name is Ricardo, and I’m -- so I’m a friend of --” I forget the guy’s name; that’s how much I put him out of my mind, out of my memory. But I was like, “I was renting a room from him.” He’s like, “Do you want this apartment?” I was like, “I’m not sure if I’ll be able to afford this, at this point.” And then he said, “You know, because -- you know, maybe I could help,” you know, he was like, “I feel bad that you’re in a situation here, but I try to help colored people. You know, I tried to help --” oh, his name was Michael. Yeah, so, “I tried to help Michael out, even. I try to help colored people out,” or whatnot. Now, mind you, I knew I was dealing with someone from a different generation. So, I decided to stay calm and not be -- be rude about the situation, or be upset. I should say, be upset about the situation. I just was like, “Well, you know, unfortunately, he chose to swindle you. And he swindled me, too.” It was like, “I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to try to stay here,” but I was like, “I don’t think I would like to.”

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. So, I think within a three- or four-day period, he allowed me to get my -- all my stuff out, and luckily, I was able -- I had a friend who had property in Far Rockaway, Queens. And luckily, there was an apartment that was available -- thank God. (laughs) And it was my own place. And it was -- you know. A decent-sized place, and -- in terms of me being able to do my art there, it was perfect, and this, that, and the other, and it just was -- that was home for me, for about eight or nine years. So the same time I was at Sony was the same time I was living in Far Rockaway.

REBECCA JACOBS: So maybe --

RICARDO FRANCIS: So --

REBECCA JACOBS: Maybe what we could do is take a short break.

RICARDO FRANCIS: OK.

REBECCA JACOBS: And then get back and -- because it's been about an hour, so I'll just --

RICARDO FRANCIS: OK.

REBECCA JACOBS: -- pause for a short break.

RICARDO FRANCIS: OK. [00:58:03]

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REBECCA JACOBS: [00:00:00] This is Rebecca Jacobs. I'm back with Ricardo Francis. It is the 13<sup>th</sup> of June, 2014. This is the second recording we're starting today in Brooklyn in our interview. So where we left off, we were talking -- you were talking about New York and how you moved out of the apartment in Brooklyn to Queens. Maybe before we talk more about that, we can go back to earlier memories from childhood. Whenever you want to start from, or any particular stories from elementary school or middle school, or...

RICARDO FRANCIS: I'll go back to the one with James Woods in fifth grade. He formed a boy choir, and we sang in different parts of the city. And it was an interesting dynamic, in terms of learning how to sing, which is -- it's a lot more -- there's a lot more to it than people think. I think people now, they see *American Idol*, or they see any of the -- or *The Voice*, or any of these shows, and they just think that someone can just go out on the

stage and just belt out a song, and then that's it. It takes a lot of training, a lot of -- a lot of practice, a lot of knowing how to go into a song, and find its core, and make it believable, so that the audience, whoever hears it, is surrounded by the song that you're singing. And I think that he taught that to me. And that, to me, I learned a lot about how to, as even as an artist -- because it was always really my plan, was to be an artist. That's -- that taught me a lot about how art is, to do the same thing. If someone is to see one of my pieces -- even if they don't necessarily like it, the image will remain in their head forever. No matter what. That's always been my -- my thing. But getting back to him, I learned a lot about devotion. I learned a lot about discipline. I learned a lot about if a deadline is coming up, you best make sure that you meet whatever is necessary for that. And he was -- he was about that with homework, he was about that with his class. And he was about that with the boy choir. What ended up happening soon after about a year of being in the boy choir that he formed, in Lockhart Elementary School, there was a instit-- well, not an institution. I would say, it is a boy choir that was formed of -- with -- that one had to audition for, that was called Houston -- Singing Boys of Houston. Which eventually became Houston Boychoir, after some years, or whatnot. But kind of similar to how [Menudo] in Puerto Rico had different members (laughs) of the years. It's the same with choirs, like, a choir is always -- it's the same choir, but they recycle -- I mean, like, the -- well, not recycle, I'm sorry to say that. They choose different members for a particular period of time. So of course, to sing -- and mind you, the vocal range of -- because estrogen and testosterone is for kids, are about the same levels before the voice changes around age 13 or 14 for boys, before they become men. It's first soprano, second soprano, alto -- depending on what it is for the particular kid. So, I believe then I was a first soprano. (laughs) Both in his choir, and when I eventually auditioned for Singing Boys of Houston, I ended up being a first soprano. Which, to me, when I think about it, it's hilarious, because when my voice changed, it was like complete opposite in many ways. It's like a -- I couldn't hit high C's or E's anymore.

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. But, it was a great experience of being with Singing Boys of Houston, because you had to -- it was very much the same thing with working with Mr.

Woods. It was like, you had a concern, you had to be there on time. You [00:05:00] had to, of course, to get into the work. You had to -- and I learned a lot at the -- I think at the time, I -- you learned a lot about music theory. So learning how to read notes. And also I had an interest in piano. So I was sort of learning piano based off of learning music through this experience. So it was interesting to not only know what the melody was, or the harmonies, in terms of the songs we sung, but also just even knowing how to play at least a little bit of the accompaniment as well. Just to know, exactly how, you know, to portray a song, or to get into it or not. And to make a long story short, one of -- the first experience of leaving Houston, and going overseas was Poland, in 1990.

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: I was 14. And there was an international boy choir festival that was in [Pontenan], Poland. So, that was my first experience ever leaving the country. And I was like -- for me, it was like a sort of a small victory. It was like, wow, like, I get to leave the country, and experience a completely different place I knew nothing about. And at that time, I believe Lech Walesa -- sorry if I've butchered the poor guy's name, but he -- the communism had just ended in Poland. And of course, we were -- I'm not sure if it was warned, or we were just instructed that a lot of the country is going through transition, by the time we'll be arriving there. I mean, not that it was going to be not safe, but that a lot of the, you know, the traditions would be kind of, in some places, very obvious that it was part of the old world order. And then in certain parts it would be -- you know, things would be a lot different. And I think what -- the experience I had is that we were two weeks there. We toured the country. We had one big concert that was in Pontenan, with different choirs from around the world, that were part -- and we sang [A *Stabat Mater*] by a Polish composer, who I think was still alive at the time. And it was one of the greatest experiences ever, you know? And we were in a big, old, Catholic church that probably, I think it was there from, like -- it had been there, I can't remember the exact time that it was made, but it definitely felt medieval. That was for sure. It didn't have air conditioning or heating, or whatnot. So it was like being in -- like sort of stuck in time somewhere, and for me, that was a great learning experience. But it was interesting to see the difference between being in America and being in this Eastern

European country. And some of the things that they did were completely opposite from what we do here in America, and that's the aspect I cherished was that I was completely in a situation that was so unlike being here.

REBECCA JACOBS: Why do you think you were interested in traveling and having those experiences as a kid? You know, again, you felt like this was something you were looking forward to for a long time before you got to travel there.

RICARDO FRANCIS: My mind believes -- and even at that time, as well as I do now, that every human being has the right -- the God-given right to travel the world. There's a reason why, when you look at President Obama's background, in that he was sort of hopping from country to country or place to place, I almost am kind of envious of him, because he got to really experience many parts of the world, really before coming the mainland. You know, Hawaii, in many ways, to me, does not seem like it's part of the US, even though, technically, it is. But it's, in many ways, so far away from the ebb and flow of what typically happens in the lower 48. (laughs) So, I mean, I -- but, you know -- but again, for me, I just felt like, one should experience this. One should experience, like, you know, you're in another country, you have to do as the locals do, and for me, that was -- I felt it was this -- it was a distinct honor, to be able to experience that. And it taught me a lot about the value of life, and the value of what life should be about. You hear sometimes, [00:10:00] which to me just seems crazy, but some children don't ever leave their neighborhoods. Some people don't ever leave their neighborhoods. And even here in New York, there's some kids that are always in their neighborhood, and they do not see the splendors of the city, whether it's the Metropolitan Museum, or the Statue of Liberty, or Coney Island. Like, to me, that bogs my mind, like that's simply -- you just get into a train, and you can go to all these things. And yet, a lot of them... They know it's there, or they have some idea that it's there, but a great deal of them don't -- they, for whatever reason, are not exposed to that. So, yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: So that sounds like an amazing experience you had as a young teenager. Great vivid memory. Do you have any others that you want to share from that time period?

RICARDO FRANCIS: I think from the same period, the next big trip we had was to -- what state was it? New Mexico. We went to perform in a few cities in that state. And -- but mind you, I'd been to that area before, because my mother had relocated my sister and I to Los Angeles, when I was eight years old.

REBECCA JACOBS: So you didn't live with your grandmother --

RICARDO FRANCIS: For one -- about a y-- about a couple of years.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. That was a big production, in many ways, because she didn't want any of us to leave. And that was, for her, it was almost like a kind of a traumatic -- a traumatic, emotionally, I should say, period for her, because her children are leaving. You know? And so, she fought that with my mother. But for my mother -- and this is the type of person she is, which is, I think, we -- she and I have in many ways the same kind of spirit of adventure, in terms of like, we want to experience life, sometimes in many -- in different places, just to see what it's like, or to experience something that's different from the last experience or whatnot. She put my sister and I in -- she had a Toyota Corolla, I think. I think, yeah. We drove from Houston all the way to west Texas, which was already two days in and of itself. Which -- (laughs) Texas is a big state, if y'all don't know that already. (laughs) So, but it was wonderful to see the changes of landscape, because Houston is flat. It's just buildings and houses, and this, that, and the other. It -- not particularly very interesting, aesthetically, but once you get to San Antonio, it begins to be more arid, and desert, and the colors of -- of especially, I would say, west Texas. I really got to see, for the first time, the beauty of land, or the landscape. And I remember vividly one moment where we were at a diner in El Paso. And I remember the sun setting. And the -- it was a beautiful, like, pink, and dark sienna, and blue, with this sun, who -- which appeared orange, in this picture, as it was setting. And I just was like, this is just absolutely beautiful. So no matter what happens on this journey, if I get to see and experience more of this, I'll be happy. And we -- going through Alb-- not Albuquerque. But I think we did go through Albuquerque. But we went through Arizona, New Mexico -- no, actually, New Mexico first, and then Arizona. And then we did get to see parts of the Grand Canyon. I think we stopped twice, to just

sit, to just look. And all I can remember was just -- there was, I think, tears at one point, at one of the moments. Just was like... For a place that's so -- that's considered barren, and without life, to me it had full of life. And it was so, sort of like a -- a very poetic way of looking at how existence is, is that there's life, there is existence, and there is death, and then there is the rebirth of things, or whatnot. But we eventually got into Los Angeles. And that trip was like [00:15:00] a three-and-a-half-day adventure. To me, LA was important, but -- and there was a pretty decent experience, I would say, like a -- at the time, I was in third grade, and I had a Filipina teacher. Her name was Ms. Sandoval. I never remembered her first name. She was always Ms. Sandoval. She was -- she was kind of short, very thin. She had a very... You could tell she loved teaching. And you could tell she loved her class. She always knew specific problems with each student. And she somehow knew how to give the right amount of attention to each child, which is rare. I think most teachers are not able to do that. There's quite a few that can, but I think most of them really don't have the gift to knowing exactly what to do, and she -- I could see that, and sense that she did. But that -- I mean, with her, I would say, you know, in terms of going to school, that was relatively fun, and we had stayed with -- for a short time, with an aunt of -- that was of my mother's, who is a biological aunt. Her name was Aunt Gertrude. I just remember her being very diva-esque in many ways. She was very, like, everything was -- had to be very proper, and very -- what is it? Stately, in some way. Her house was that way. And she just was a very poised and -- she had a lot of poise and a lot of elegance about her, which I -- I liked. We eventually -- I remember one thing about staying with her was that -- my sister and I shared a room with a bathroom, and there was a huge house. It was like, oh my goodness. Like -- I think I asked her once, like, "What did you do to have this big house?" (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: That's such a good kid question, right?

RICARDO FRANCIS: She never really answered that question. But, you know, I didn't really want to get too much into -- to the reasons why. But I remember she -- there was a -- but this neighborhood, it was in Compton. And this was before, like the sort of, the aspect of what people think of Compton, through the eyes of Dr. Dre, and Snoop Doggy-Dogg, or whatnot. This neighborhood was, I would say, pretty quiet. Mostly black and

Latino. But it was quiet, and actually a bit like I felt like I was in the country, believe it or not. A lot of homes had livestock in the back yards. And I remember every morning around 6:00 a.m., with like, without fail, there was these three roosters there was (laughing) in the neighbor's back yard. And they would just -- you know. They would do their thing, as you know.

REBECCA JACOBS: You got to move to LA to live on the farm. (inaudible)

RICARDO FRANCIS: I know, right? But that continued when my mother rented a house literally like two blocks away from where Aunt Gertrude was. And the owners of this property was a black, and an Indian couple by the name of Pete and May Wildhorse. Literally their name. They were hilarious. They always got drunk almost every evening. And on the weekends, without fail -- I'll never forget it -- they would have horrendous fights with each other. They would throw glasses, throw plates. They both smoked cigars. It was like, one was -- they're the same exact copy of each other, in many ways.

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Ironically, you know, I got to really, as a kid, talk to both of them, and -- well, their trade, in terms of work, was that they nursed sick livestock animals back to health.

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And then gave them back to their original owners. So I got to, in the back yard, I got to see donkeys, rabbits, ponies -- which I had learned to ride. Actually, I was petrified of all that stuff and whatnot. But eventually, through their guidance, I grew to learn how to, you know, properly ride a horse, or whatnot. But you know, I was -- what the hell was I? Eight. Yeah, I was eight. And imagine, you know, a little short, skinny kid (laughs) having to get on top of a -- a -- well, at that time, a pony. I mean, maybe some kids love all that stuff. To me, I was afraid they would [00:20:00] kick me off of it, or whatnot, and what have you. But I eventually overcame that fear. But I learned a lot about life, oddly enough through talking with them, and they never -- I think one thing, I -- from both of them, that I learned, was that one should never not try to help someone when they're down. The same way that they helped these animals who went -- for whatever reasons why they were there. They never thought about, well, I'm

not going to help this one, because of so-and-so-and-so. And no -- it's odd -- oddly enough, no animal died while they were there, or through their hands. They'd seem to all come around to a certain degree, which was - which was amazing, I think.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: So, just to clarify, you said they were -- an -- just a side thing, you said they were black and Indian?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Mm-hmm.

REBECCA JACOBS: Like, from India, or Native American -- American Ind--

RICARDO FRANCIS: No, Native American. Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah. American Indian?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK. That's interesting.

RICARDO FRANCIS: I'm sorry, guys, for the -- (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: No big deal.

RICARDO FRANCIS: -- the non-PC term. But I mean, that's what I will remember it as -

REBECCA JACOBS: That's as a child, yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: As a child, yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: I just wanted to ask to clarify.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah, yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: So it sounds like you had some really interesting adults who had impressions on you, like this teacher --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes.

REBECCA JACOBS: -- and then this couple, and your grandmother, and your mother.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes.

REBECCA JACOBS: So very interesting, you know, what you learned from different people.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah. So -- and this aunt you lived -- your mother's aunt?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Gertrude, yes.

REBECCA JACOBS: Aunt Gertrude, yeah. So you were in LA for a couple years, or...?

RICARDO FRANCIS: We -- I think my sister and I were there for, at the most, about a year and a half. And I remember both of us have -- being very homesick. And we wanted to move back. So there was a special arrangement, where my grandmother was going to take care of us for a while without my mother, and then my mother wanted to finish up some work responsibilities while being in LA. So that's what happened. But, again, somehow, music always was (laughs) part of my life, to a certain degree. There was a -- on the way to the airport -- I'll never forget it -- the song "Never Going to Dance Again" by George Michael came on -- (laughs) we -- my mother drove -- like, you know, got me and my sister to the gate. And I'm thinking to myself like... It's just -- it was a -- it just was sort of icing on the cake. I mean, icing on the cake, in terms of, I will always remember this moment. And in fact, this was my first time on a plane, too. Yeah. I'm trying to think if I was on a plane before then when I was like -- no, I wasn't. I think this was the first time I went on a plane. So, imagine, it was just -- my mother was not there. It just was -- well, actually, I take that back. technically, I was on a plane when my mother and father were still together, and I was, I think, maybe two years old. And this is when they had a trip to Panama. But again, I don't remember that. You know? I don't really remember my life until I was probably about three, or so. Like, I remember -- it -- you know, in terms of aspects of it. But in terms of as a cognitive child, this was my first, I think, being on a plane, and I remember having to sort of -- going into my mind and saying to be calm and relax. And I just held my sister's hand, and I think she was probably more with it, better than I was. But I remember it feeling like it was just a -- like being at a -- at an amusement park. Like going up a ride. That's how I remember it is that, so it was never -- it ended up not being a scary experience.

REBECCA JACOBS: And then your grandparents were there when you arrived?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Well, I think at the time, my -- my grandfather had already passed.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And then my grandmother had picked -- picked us up. My grandmother, and my -- there was an aunt, by the name of Georgia. But her -- we always -- we'd always called her Georgie. That was her nickname. I think she -- they both picked us up, and then gave us a big dinner, and (laughs) --

REBECCA JACOBS: That's good.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And then we were -- we were back.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: So, I guess... If you want to talk about the -- so you went -- I guess we got derailed, actually -- not derailed, it was a wonderful [00:25:00] description of your time in Los Angeles, and -- but... I think we ended up getting there because when you were talking about a trip, you went with your choir?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Choir, yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah. If you want to...

RICARDO FRANCIS: Well, I got re-acquainted with the southwest when they -- we toured New Mexico. And again, in my mind, I'm like, oh, this is very similar to going to Poland. It's like, it's going to be -- you know, deadlines, there's, you know, there's an itinerary. Literally, we would get the itinerary weeks before we actually went. So I would just sit and study it and say, this is going to happen here, that's going to happen there. And by the time it was time to go on all of this stuff, my mind was already ready to accept whatever was going to happen. This time around, though, I began -- you -- we had a tour guide, which was kind of interesting. And we -- did we fly? No, we took the bus, actually. We took the bus there. And we were given more of a, I would a direct impression of what it's like to live there, and I remember seeing adobe houses for the first time, period, ever. I was like, well, why didn't I see this the last time. (laughs) But then I was like, well, maybe we weren't on the right roads to see that. (laughs) But literally adobe houses, which, to me, I thought was the most -- the greatest invention. You know, in terms of for the environment or whatnot. And also, just the aspect of In-- Native American, I should say, reservations. Which I think is an inhumane, in many ways -- but I think, you know, it was interesting to see that dynamic in real life. You hear about them. I'd heard about them for quite some time. And you'd see it on TV. And then you'd see Native Americans speaking about what it's like to live in a situation like this. And... But to see it just seemed to -- for me, and still now, I think a bit sad, in many ways. But and also, just the beauty of the landscape that's there. And I just really

remember New Mexico being like, there was some great concert that we gave. And I was surprised, it was the last major one before my voice changed. And before also I went to high school. And after that -- after -- yeah, after Singing Boys of Houston, after that was over, and done with, it was time for the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. But before I go into that, which -- that was in 1990. But before that, I was -- and I have to talk about this particular teacher. His name is John [Gaines]. And he was my seventh and eighth grade art teacher, and he was the one that introduced me to painting. Which, at that time, I was drawing comic books like -- you know, I had, like -- I had a few other friends in middle school that were -- we were into Dungeons and Dragons, and all the geek -- the usual, the geek either games or whatnot. I was all into that stuff. So, we would literally challenge each other by drawing our own comic books or whatnot and this, that, and the other. And I remember Mr. Gaines sat me to the side one day. He's like, "You're going to be a painter." He's like, "You're not going to be doing comics." I was like, "Why?" I was like, "There's --" I was like, "There's money in that." (laughs) He was like, "No, you have the ability to be a great painter." I still challenged him on that. I was like -- I said -- he said, "I'll tell you what, I'll give you some private lessons. But I think you have real talent, and I think you should be a painter." I said, "OK, we'll see." I wanted to see what he was all about, in terms of that. And I think I quickly realized why he thought that was a better idea. I really enjoyed painting. I found that it was a great escape, spiritually, for me. I think that it gave me a voice that probably I needed to -- a signature voice that I needed to have, as an individual. [00:30:00] And it just taught me a lot about where my -- what my purpose in life was and where I needed to go. So, seventh and eighth grade, having him as my teacher and whatnot, he opened -- prepared me to get into the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. And that was, you had to, again -- you had to -- what's the word? You had to audition to get in. And I was nervous. I was actually probably a bit of a nervous wreck, because I really, really wanted to get in. And literally it was like a four-hour -- like, people, like, all of -- you had to, sort of -- there were like a two-page test. And half of it -- some of it was actually writing, and the other half was actually drawing, or following whatever directions were on the page, or whatnot. Then you had to -- after you -- that was the first

two hours, and then the other two hours was just waiting for yourself to be called by the staff. I mean, the -- the teachers that were in that department. And then you had like a portfolio, and I think it was of five to ten pieces. But of course, Mr. Gaines wanted me to have ten pieces, so I -- you know, I got literally, my -- my last semester was in just for me to have a portfolio ready. And I think I had to wait like maybe a few weeks, and then I got the acceptance letter. And for me, I remember the first person to know was my grandmother, and she was very proud of me. And high school, I would say, was -- I always say this to everyone, that was the best four years, in terms of education. In terms of being in an environment with people -- like-minded people. And in terms of just the progression of learning more about art, my own self as a person, and just life in many ways. And in terms of accomplishing things through art alone, was just -- for me, it was an amazing experience. And through that time, I had befriended -- I'd befriended a few fellow art major friends of mine, who we eventually became an art group called BLAFTCO. And their names were -- it was different names in the beginning, but -- different people, I should say in terms of the beginning. But the primary group was Lordy Rodriguez, myself, [Chad Amy], who was in the instrumental department. I think Andrew [Burnell], who was in the art department. Jimmy Castillo, and [Dao Tranc]. Those were the first, I think, original five members.

REBECCA JACOBS: And what was the name of the --

RICARDO FRANCIS: BLAFTCO.

REBECCA JACOBS: Blathco?

RICARDO FRANCIS: BLAFTCO.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK. How do you --

RICARDO FRANCIS: It's --

REBECCA JACOBS: -- can you -- want to spell it for me?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah, B-L-A-F-T-C-O.

REBECCA JACOBS: Cool. How does it...

RICARDO FRANCIS: All with periods at each end of the letters. And it literally was just an acronym of either our first or last names. So we were -- there was a -- there's a thing in Houston called the Art Car Parade. And it's basically like, say, similar -- very similar in

many ways to, say, the West Indian Day Parade here, here in Brooklyn. Or any of the parades from Fifth Avenue for either Pride in June, or -- Pride month of June -- or say, even the Thanksgiving Day parade or whatnot. Same idea, but these are, like, cars that are meant to be designed by artists, in the city of Houston. Just about anybody can really enter. And it's just a big festival, and people come out and have a good time, and they see all these crazy floats and/or cars that are created. So we created this car. I really forget what the idea was. It was this very serious -- it almost looked like something that should belong in, like, at a -- for Halloween party (laughs) or something. But it was a car about... The -- was it the negative aspects of war or whatnot? So, I mean, when I think about it now, it was like, maybe that was a little too serious for this event, [00:35:00] but I mean, that's what we all decided to do. But something happened, and we ended up not doing -- the project ended up not going up -- flying off of the ground. And we were pretty bummed out about it. But just the aspect of working together was a great experience. So Chad and Andrew decided that they weren't really interested in continuing with this. So it ended up being myself, Lordy, Dao, another art major friend of ours, named Mario Martinez, who ended up joining us. And we got the idea — there was a -- it was a place called Midtown Arts Center in my neighborhood, in the Third Ward in Houston. And rent for art studios there was \$125 a month. You try to get a studio -- an art studio here, you're paying at least \$300 or \$400 -- at least \$300 or \$400. But it was a decent-sized space. We had our -- we shared a bathroom with -- yeah, I shared a bathroom with the adjacent studio or whatnot. And it was unheard of for high school students. This place had never had high school students approach them for a studio space. But they accepted our idea, and we all paid I think like \$20 or \$25 a month to have the studio space. And we would invite curators, people that were in the Houston art world to stop by and look at our stuff.

REBECCA JACOBS: Were you making art together, or did you just share the space, or --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Both.

REBECCA JACOBS: Both. And what were some of the themes that you were interested in personally, and as a group, with your art back then?

RICARDO FRANCIS: That's a good question. There was not like, now that I think about it, we, for the most part, did work on our own terms, but there were -- we exhibited a lot together. So, in many ways, the work was symbiotic. I think that our work was political in many ways. But political in a very sort of fantastical type of way. To me, it's like, I think of the aspect of, say, Diego Rivera, or Frida Kahlo's work. It's being political, but in a fantastical type of way. So for each of us, we did that in our -- but through our own lenses. You know? I was very much into the aspect of how people were perceived socially, so that was really the theme of my work. I think for Dao, he was interested in the aspect of how people -- what habitats people were in. So his concern was more structural and whatnot, so his thing was really installation. Lordy's was, at the time, his was, this thing with the aspect of death in terms of animals. But it was, in many ways, I think it was a great mirror, in terms of talking about how human beings are, environmentally with each other and to the planet, or whatnot. So I think I saw his work in that way. Jimmy's work -- he's a photographer -- was very much about his view of himself being Mexican. And just growing up with his family, and also in -- growing up Mexican. And for him, he didn't visually look like what people typically think Mexicans to be. People thought he was either Greek or European or something other than the usual. So that was also -- that was a major aspect of -- kind of really used himself as the symbol of his work, in terms of how he's viewed or whatnot. And Mario's work was a bit abstract. And he had -- he was very preoccupied with the manipulation of materials. And some of -- a lot of his work was self-portraits in many ways. But yeah, his work was a bit more -- probably the most personal and biographical out of all of our stuff.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah. I'd love to hear more about what you said, the difference in how people are seen, and feel, or your particular -- could you describe a little more what the -- what --

RICARDO FRANCIS: In terms of me, or --

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah --

RICARDO FRANCIS: -- in terms of --

REBECCA JACOBS: -- for you.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Hm. [00:40:00] I think then that goes into the bigger picture, in terms of how does one identify his or herself in general. And I don't think about race. I don't think about identity. I think about the aspect of I want to be known as an artist, and I want to be known as a visionary to some degree. That's all I really want. The aspect that -- I happen to be black, or half black and half Panamanian, is inconsequential. Me being also gay is inconsequential as well. Me being male is inconsequential as well. Those things are -- they're important. But only to a certain point. For me, as I get up every day, to be able to create beautiful works of art, and/or to help produce an exhibit with either my work or with other artists' work is far more important because that truly leaves a mark on my life. I mean, for my -- for myself, for other people. So that's, for me, more important than the other stuff.

REBECCA JACOBS: And then when you were making art in high school, that was something you were dealing with trying to -- or you said --

RICARDO FRANCIS: I was speaking more in general terms, I believe.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: At that time, I was speaking more in general terms. And it was just trying to understand technicality as well. Another light bulb moment -- again this is dealing with music, or it seems music and art have sort of an interesting relationship. I remember being -- remember getting a free ticket to see the Dance Theater of Harlem. They performed at Jones Hall, which was like, one of the -- there was that auditorium, and then there was also the Wortham Theater Center, which the Houston Grand Opera and the Houston Ballet both did most of their performances out of. Jones Hall was more of like a -- traveling groups would perform there. But both auditoriums are, like really, like, two blocks away from each other. I remember going to see the Dance Theater of Harlem, and I pretty much enjoyed -- really enjoyed the concert. It's like I enjoyed seeing dance on -- and classical dance or whatnot on -- and ballet or whatnot -- and even Modern Dance on PBS, growing up. But to see it live -- not that this was my first time, but this was, I think the first time seeing a group from New York come here. and I think I was seven -- no, fif-- 15. Fifteen or Sixteen. And there was one work called "North Star," and the -- the choreographer was Lar Lubavitch. And the music was my Philip

Glass. And it felt like when I saw the movement and the music, and the costumes, and the lighting and everything, it -- for whatever reason, that piece stood out as the only thing that ever happened that night. And I was completely floored. I think that was a moment that changed my view of painting and art drastically. Just the way, I think, Philip Glass's work deals with the aspect of time an repetition, and layer and texturing, is something that, for me, as an artist, I connected to very much. So, right after that performance, I wanted to know everything about him, as a composer. I wanted that particular recording, but at the time, it was not released yet, so I think my first album by his was *Dance Pieces*. And then there were others that I got. Eventually I collected pretty much almost (laughing) everything he did through the years. But in terms of like the technique, it's layering. Layering, layering, layering, layering. And, for me, I used that in terms of, like, working -- at first it was working the -- working the image through abstraction first, and then the figures or whatever it was going to be, and the painting would come out through all of the layering. The initial first few sittings with the piece. So that was sort of my artistic -- my artistic sort of interpretation of how he composes (inaudible).

REBECCA JACOBS: Oh, yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: (laughs) Yeah. But I've found that actually that was a great way of thinking about painting, because it was a great way to use color, it was a great way to manipulate compositions. And it was just -- I felt [00:45:00] it taught me how to sort of create a technique all of my own. But getting back to BLAFTCO, though, we eventually -- someone had found out -- I think a classmate had told -- a woman by the name of Alice Valdez, who is the executive director of a place called the Multicultural Education and Counseling to the Arts, or MECA, which it's known as. And it's in the Sixth Ward, near downtown in Houston. And it's an art center for the Sixth Ward, which is -- that particular part of the Sixth Ward is a mostly Mexican and/or Central South American neighborhood. And at the time, it was very poor. It's a lot different now; it's a lot more gentrified now, and all -- it's a lot -- many different groups of people that live there now. But at that time, most of the students were either Mexican, and/or Central/South American. And then there were -- there were others. There was black students, and even

white students came, either after school, or for the summer program. The summer program was like, their -- they got the most money for their -- for their -- what is it? For the programming through that. So programming -- the summer program was like, literally a three-month, intense learning process for the kids there. And they got to choose whether they were in music, or in ballet, or in folklórico, dance, or in art, like, they got to choose. It was almost like going to camp, but it was an art camp. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: Sounds awesome.

RICARDO FRANCIS: So, to make a long story short, though, so a classmate of ours told Alice, like, "Oh, you should really meet these artists. Like, they literally have a studio at Midtown Arts Center, and no one has ever really done that. And they work really great as a collective," and this, that, and the other. And it was like, "Maybe they could help out at MECA." So she called a meeting with all of us. We sat in her office, and she said, "Look." She said, "It makes no sense for you all to be paying the whatever money you are to be there. Why don't we do this? I'll give you all a classroom you share together." And literally this -- literally, the classroom we were given was, like -- it was huge. It was, like -- I'm trying to think of a space. I'm trying to think about it in square feet, but it was the size of a typical classroom was what we got. So it was like, "I'll give you a classroom, y'all can work there almost any time of the day. But the payoff is that you have to produce art projects for the students here." And before anyone else could answer, I was like, "Sure, we'll do it." (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: And so they were -- younger -- you're in high school. These are --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes.

REBECCA JACOBS: -- elementary school?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes. For the most part, elementary and/or middle school.

REBECCA JACOBS: Mm-hmm.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Some high school students, but mostly there -- they ended up -- they really only -- I would say, for the most part, dealt with mostly just elementary and middle school students. For the most part. And -- excuse me. I'm sorry. So our -- I think our last year, as seniors, we had this wonderful space. I mean, we were able to do so much with that. And the first project we developed for them was one called

the New Museum. There -- and for Houston -- Houston does not -- most spaces do not have either homes, or buildings don't have basements. Because of -- it's sea level. Certain parts of the city, the sea level is higher, and in other parts it's lower, or whatnot. And of course, if it rains, flooding is always typically a really bad problem, but this was one of the few buildings in the city that had an operating, functioning basement. So, when I looked at it, it -- literally, there was a boys' restroom, immense space, and a girls' restroom. And the first thing I said, when I -- even, when I saw the first restroom, I was like, "This -- murals would be great here." So, I talked to the guys, and I was like, "What do you think of we do murals here in this space, in both the boys' and girls' restroom, and call it the New Museum?"

REBECCA JACOBS: That's great.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And literally within minutes, they -- everyone was like, "That would be -- that would really work." And we got other artists -- [00:50:00] you know, other classmates involved. And we got the students involved. And that was our first major project for MECA. And --

REBECCA JACOBS: That's great.

RICARDO FRANCIS: That was our -- sort of our graduation thesis, in many ways. We had to do our own theseses [*sic*] for graduating. Like, you had to come up with -- you had to have a show with another classmate. But this was our sort of, I would say, icing in the cake, was to do this project, and it had a big opening, and got a lot of support, and it got media coverage, and this, that, and the other, and... Then we agreed, we continue with BLAFTCO. But we all went separate ways, to go to college. I went into the [Meloncy] College of Art in -- I graduated from HSPV in 1994, and literally months later, I'm in school in Baltimore. And each summer, as we went back, we had different projects that we developed. So, our summers was all spent in Houston. And we still got the same classroom (laughs) to work, and not only did we do, like, a major project for MECA each year, but we also did separate shows, BLAFTCO exhibits in different spaces in the city. And it's a shame, though. We -- I think our last project was a fashion show that was called "All Sizes, All People" in 1997. And it was to challenge the idea of beauty in the fashion industry. So the designers were young designers. Some of them were fellow

classmates that we knew that were definitely fashion designers, one of which who, she's now -- her name's Lauren [Kelly]. She now lives here in New York. She was a curator for [Purview Annum] University, and now she's going to be curator of the soon-to-be-opened Children's Museum that's going to be in Harlem, here in New York. But at that time, she was hired as the production consultant and teacher for the fashion design class that we had put into our proposal for the show. What ended up happening with this project was that, there is another alternative space -- I thought of an idea of having a visual arts show of the people contributing to this project, at Diverse Works, which is an alternative arts space that's very popular in Houston. They agreed to have the show up almost at the last minute, and to have an artists' talk. And it was actually the first -- very first part of the project. So the show was there, and then we had an artists' talk with people that were invited or whatnot. And then we actually had the fashion show at MECA, which had a lot of great responses from people. And then the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston heard of the idea, and it was like, "OK, we have a family day coming up, would you -- we would love to have this project here." And I said, sure. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: We got their auditorium.

REBECCA JACOBS: Amazing.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. And -- but, you know, again, this was -- this is what the arts does. It touches people. It brings people together, it educates people. Sometimes you cannot educate people through books alone. You cannot educate them through even going and doing research. Through either writing or through even the internet or whatnot. Sometimes people need to go through learning through the arts. And I do believe -- do, do, definitely believe that it also aids in going to writing, and going to literature on particular subjects, because you spot the seed or the interest in something through [someone] through arts, or through dance. They're all interconnected. They're all interrelated. The same with the sciences. You know, a very close friend of mine, Leo, he said the -- I was like, "I understand the arts and sciences are important. But how are they really --" He's like, "They're interconnected." It's like, "Well, how are they really interconnected?" And he said, "They all come from emotion." I was like, "You've got

to explain that to me.” It’s like, [00:55:00] “I can see art as being emotional, but not scientists.” He’s like, “Yeah, scientists.” He’s like, “Yeah, scientists are emotional. They get an idea, and they are excited about it. So then they go and study it, and then they take their theory, and it becomes an actuality. And it’s the same with artists. It’s an emotional reaction to an idea, and then they go and they create it, and it becomes an actuality.” And then, once he explained that, I was like, “Oh. I get it.”

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: It makes complete sense now.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah. That’s --

RICARDO FRANCIS: But again, it was -- this was a tell-tale sign of how you have, I would say, a great idea. That idea grows. And then others find out, and then this is how connections are made and this, that, and the other. But unfortunately, BLAFTCO had disbanded in '97. And at that time, it was a pivotal moment, because I -- then it was the last year in college in Baltimore. And then soon I had moved up here to New York, and -- it was an interesting transition to go from, I would say a very successful art group, who I -- I really believe would have actually -- this would have been our job, or actually a real career path, if we had chose [*sic*] to stick with it. You know, everyone has -- I think everyone in BLAFTCO had different visions of what they needed to fulfill in their lives. And you know, when I look back at that now, that has to be -- that had and has to be respected. You know? So, again, I never let that be a -- what is it? A stumbling block for me, or something that I keep as a -- anything to be bitter about. It’s just the way that it is. So... Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: Well, that’s a good time, with that kind of turning point, We can take another pause.

RICARDO FRANCIS: OK. [00:57:00]

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REBECCA JACOBS: [00:00:00] I'm here with Ricardo Francis. This is Rebecca Jacobs. This is our third recording on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June, 2014, Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. So, we talked about how the group you were part of -- BLAFTCO?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes.

REBECCA JACOBS: -- disbanded. And this was at the end of college for you?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes. About the end of... I was probably, technically, if I'm not -- I'm looking at it a little bit more closely -- my junior year in college. Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: And do you want to talk about how -- your experience in college, or...?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Experience in college was actually -- when I talk about PVA, it was like, I learned a lot about being an artist. (sound interference) Sorry.

REBECCA JACOBS: No problem. Perfect.

RICARDO FRANCIS: We have a little technical difficulties, ladies and gentlemen, but we're going to get through them at this time.

REBECCA JACOBS: That's good.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Is this better?

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah, when I talk about PVA -- HSPVA, rather -- it was me learning how to be an artist, and I think for me, in college, I was learning how to be myself. So I came out at age 19, in college. And I just discovered myself as a person finally. And it was liberating in many ways. You know, I think I was -- I think I never really sat up and really had to deal with myself as a person, ever, until then. Because before that, I was Ricardo the artist. (laughing) I was always Ricardo the artist, or Ricardo the student, or Ricardo the -- the -- what is it? The one you should look up to in many circles, growing up. But finally, I had alone time. And I could deal with the one that was right in the mirror, the real me. And you know, you hear coming-out stories being horrendous from a lot of people. For me, it was -- I won't say it was exactly smooth. I know that my mother was not very happy to hear this, and she'd say, "Oh, this is a phase." I was like, "Well, hm, no. This has been there for as long as I can remember. It's just that I never acted on it until now." And slowly but surely, she and I got to understand what this is. And it's not an issue for her anymore. And luckily, it's

not an issue that I have with her with this anymore either. It's just that we have an understanding of what that is.

I mean, for my sister, she's like, "Well, I knew already, so --" (laughs) "-- that's no new news," but that she loves me, and -- you know, everything's fine. And our relationship is not going to be any different. So that was -- you know, a very good thing. It's funny, the issue of being out with other people -- I don't think about it very much. You know, I do believe that people have a private life. And I -- maybe I'm very old school in my belief that it's really no one's business. But at the same time, I do understand the reality of being at peace with oneself, and feeling complete at ease with being in any social situation and being, you know, proud of being whoever they are. So I do honor that. And I want that to be understood, in terms of this interview, because you know, I think sometimes people can take things the wrong way. And I know this -- saying that, "Oh, it shouldn't be anyone's business" can be taken in many different ways. But I want to make that very clear that I think it's a great thing for anyone that's in the LGBTQ community to be whoever they wish to be. My only thing is that it's best to allow others who don't understand to give them the ability to try to understand. And I think sometimes there's a militancy here in the LGBT community, with so-called straight people that don't get it, or whatnot. And some people may not understand it, and some people may not wish to understand what this is. And not even the big issue about those that are in our communities that -- the issue, I believe is that, because we don't naturally create children that is really the big debate. Really, is that. [00:05:00] If a man and a man could have a child together, then we wouldn't be talking about -- that is the same reason, if a woman and a woman together could create a child. Maybe if we were designed like worms, it would be a different story (laughing), because they -- (laughs) -- can be either sex (inaudible) species to do that. But -- oh, that sounds gross, right? (laughs) But again, you know, we're dealing with the aspect of religion, of cultures, of social norms. And you know, I think those things are OK to have that. But at the same time, you know, I think in every place on the planet, being LGBTQ -- there's a reality. No matter where in the world you are. It's there, to some degree. So it's amazing for me, as an adult, to

continue to hear the stories about the murders or the abuse that's done to those in our community. And it's very, very sad. You know, however they are -- I mean, that's a subject that gets a completely different interview, and -- (laughs) -- you know, it's something that's very, very subjective and whatnot. But I know for me, specifically, it has been a -- I would say a pretty smooth process. But I think in many ways I wanted it to be that way. I projected that to be the case. I did not want to sit up -- again, being black and male, I did not want that to be an issue. That is not an issue. That is not how I see myself. I simply see myself as Ricardo Francis. That's it. I'm an artist and -- first. I'm a creator first. That is my job. That is my life's purpose. Again, all of the other stuff are just minor aspects of my life. So I think that in many ways has kind of protected me from dealing with the ugliness of having to be oneself. You know? I think some people have become either militant or bitter about that, because they take the aspect of dislike of other people or some of the time -- sometimes the misunderstanding or the jeering from another group of people kind of sometimes way too far. I go by the principal of, it's better to play -- play with people by their own game. So that they understand you better, and they can look past all of the initial shock. It more is a shock in their mind than anything. And really get to know you as an individual, and it may be -- just maybe it will help them to understand other people that's in the same category or lifestyle that you're in. And I think that's worked for me, for the most part, and I think most people don't bring up the aspect that I'm gay as an issue. They bring up the aspect of just me as an individual. And I think that is what I want. And feel is best for me, in terms of dealing with life in general. Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: So in college you kind of felt comfortable saying that, and being out with your mom. And what were some other experiences from college that you remember in Baltimore?

RICARDO FRANCIS: The most important thing was just that I was creating. And I did exhibits back in Houston, and also in Baltimore. Just continuing to learn, and you know, I had dated some people -- I think I learned a lot about dating. More so, though, when I moved to New York than even there. There, it was just -- you try this, you try that. You know? (laughs) You go and hang out, and do all of the, you know, exploring through the

social -- the typical social norms that's in the LGBTQ community, and you like certain experiences, you don't like other certain experiences. It's all, you know, related in its own way or whatnot. I just -- again, the same aspect of not wanting to become jaded or bitter. I chose to -- whatever negative things that happened with people, I chose to not use that as a platform to be angry. I just -- it's like, oh, it's a learning curve. And does it mean that the next experience, whether it's dating [00:10:00] or just whatever connection I have to someone, it's going to be the same one that I had the other times before? It's just a different person. So...

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: So -- and can you clarify what you -- you were studying painting and fine art in Baltimore, or --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah, I was --

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: -- a painting major.

REBECCA JACOBS: Painting major. And where did you go to school?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Maryland Institute College of Art.

REBECCA JACOBS: OK, great. For the -- for the --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: -- recording.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Or MICA, as most alumni from there call it. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: Cool.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: That's great. So, do you want talk more about your New York stuff? We can kind of catch up where left off. You had just gotten out -- you had just had that situation with the roommate who wasn't paying rent, and the landlord who said some horrible things, and then you moved to the Rockaways?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Far Rockaway.

REBECCA JACOBS: Far Rockaway.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Mm-hmm.

REBECCA JACOBS: And so, you got to paint there. And so now we're caught up. Tell me, you know, memories from New York, moving.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Far Rockaway was interesting because I -- in terms of my own career, I had developed what I called Apanamae Productions, which was -- I literally took two words, Panama and Anime, and I combined them together. And I created my own company. So in 2000, that was the idea, was like, I'm going to --

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Do this all on my own. So it was taking like the aspects of BLAFTCO, but it was really just me as the, like, the forefront. And I had a wonderful manager, co-worker of mine when I was at Sony Music. Her name was [Terry-Ann Harris], who stepped in and she was in school at the time for business administration. And she's like, "Oh, this would be a great challenge for me. And I've never worked with the visual arts before, so why not?" So I would -- I taught her things, she taught me things. And I would say we worked together for about three years, actually. Maybe two or three years. And she really helped to form -- not BLAFTCO. Sorry. (laughing) Apanamae Productions, or whatnot. And it grew from an idea -- and I love this project -- to something that's an idea, and then it becomes an actual something, whether it's an exhibit. The first exhibit I had was -- with the Apanamae Productions -- was one called "Exhibit A" at the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance. And -- when was that show? The show was in 2000... I think it was in 2001, actually. Sorry, some of the dates are a little weird. But yeah, but so, there -- kind of right after 9/11. And then that happened. And this was my first, like, solo show in New York, period. I mean, I think I exhibited at a few places, and typically they were in the Bronx, for some reason. Which people -- again, people talk about the Bronx here as being only the Yankees, or certain other things, not very favorable things. (laughs) But for me, as an artist, I would say that I got a start exhibiting there. So I have great appreciation for the Bronx in that respect.

But I exhibited there and you know, got some sales through that show. And then the very next show was one called "New Skin," which was at Café del Artiste. Which used to be in the West Village, on Thompson Street. And it was a sort of a favorite place for artists

to do exhibits there. And then some live musicians would also perform there or whatnot, and this, that, and the other, and I just immersed myself with shows and projects, and things. I also did a performance project, again at [BAAD], called [Kyoda-esque], which was in response to 9/11. And I continued with the Apanamae Productions until 2006. Then by that time, I had -- Terry-Ann had left. And then my then-lover at the time, [Benny Vasquez], had took over what she was doing. And it was -- he was, I think -- because he works in education, and administration, he kind of instinctively knew certain things that Terry-Ann and I, in terms of working [00:15:00] together, we kind of worked -- we had a system that worked for us, where she learned things, and then I learned things as well. But he was able to kind of just -- he knew what was going on, and then said, "OK, well, we should try this," and this, that, and the other. And we just continued to work and do stuff, and in 2006, he and I split. And also, I split away from the Apanamae Productions as well. And I was discovered by a very close friend of mine, his name is Leo -- [Leonides Rosa Molinara], owner of Leonidesarts Gallery in midtown Manhattan. And again, another moment of life where everything just sort of changed very quickly. (laughs) It was like, one door closed, or one part of my life closed, and then the next one opened. And through his help and guidance, I -- I think spiritually I understood a lot more about how to have a better relationship with the art. And it was very difficult with him in the first two years, I think. In terms of the working relationship. I was still coming off of the remnants of what Apanamae Productions was like, and also just in terms of what I was -- how I was thinking as an artist. I moved away from Far Rockaway also in 2007, I think? And I moved to Manhattan to Washington Heights for about a year and a half or so. And then -- a great place. I was on 181<sup>st</sup> and Morning-- was it Morningside? I forget the street, but it's literally right by the George Washington Bridge. Beautiful view. Just, I really loved the neighborhood and this, that, and the other. I couldn't afford it, though, and there was -- towards the end, rather, I couldn't afford it. And I was like, well, I have to get -- once the lease is over with, it's, for me, financially better that I move elsewhere. And I got an opportunity to live in Jersey City, and that's -- which is where I've been at now. And again, like many other people, around the time Obama came into office, my work, in terms of a day job, per se -- I was sort of in and out.

Because I was -- I was let go from Sony, because they closed the studio down. And literally all 300 people that were working there were just -- you know, given a stipend and they could get on unemployment, and... I decided at that time to just paint. Because I personally felt like I needed the time to do that. Luckily I had -- there was enough money to just sort of keep me bouncing around for a bit, comfortably -- relatively comfortably. But at the same time, I really believed that eventually I could have just probably had a few months of that, and then really go back to work, and I just -- I waited too long, I think. And it was very different, being younger when I first got to New York, and finding a job, which was much easier. Too bad Clinton wasn't in office. (laughs) But -- ah, but -- (sound interference) ooh, sorry.

REBECCA JACOBS: You're fine?.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah, after that, it was just was -- it was just difficult to find something steady. So again, it was still, painting all the time. And I didn't really exhibit until -- I kind of stopped -- I think the last major show I had was in 2007. And it was a show back home in Houston at an area [Purview Annum] University. And that was the last, like, major show, exhibit that I did. I did, like, maybe other smaller things here, or attached to the Leonidesarts Gallery. But to me, the work did not -- the artwork that I was making did not -- it was not saying much of anything that I wanted. It wasn't until 2011, when I did one painting, called "Truth." Which was just a simple 14-inch square portrait of a guy that modeled for me. It was just his face. It had a red background, and the word "Truth" on the lower right-hand corner, and it was like, just the way it was painted, actually, technically drawn, because with painting now, I draw with paint, not paint with paint. And it was like, again, another light bulb moment, like, this is what I'm supposed to do.

REBECCA JACOBS: Why was it? I'd love to hear a little more.

RICARDO FRANCIS: It was taking the -- painting -- my issue with painting is that it becomes to me -- it's such an insular act. [00:20:00] And not many -- like, only the person that's making it ends up being the one that's experiencing the process. I think what ends up happening in the end is, you can see all of the pain sometimes that has went into making - - or the work that -- I should say, rather that went into making that piece. For me, it was

pain, though. And I feel like, that is what kept the work from connecting with people on a very psychic level, I suppose. I think it wasn't until that piece where it felt care-free to make the piece. It did not feel -- I didn't feel bogged down, creating it. It was a wonderful learning experience. And it was easier than I thought it was going to be. It's as, you know, I went -- I looked at it as that it has -- it's dense, it has complexity. It has line, it has marks, it has color, it has emotion. But yet, it was -- I didn't have to think. But again, this was something I learned from Leo is like, "You're thinking too much when working on your stuff. Don't think. Stop thinking. Stop thinking. Stop thinking." And at first, that sounds cryptic and ridiculous. Especially for an artist. (laughs) Because it was like, "I have to think about these things. [Well, what cast in] mean something?" Like, "Why does your work have to mean anything?" That was his argument to me. Why does it have to mean anything? It doesn't have to mean anything. Whatever you find interesting is what it is. Again, for me, you know, because I like to talk back to people, I suppose (laughing), I battled that, but in the process of doing it, I then realized what he meant. So I would say very shortly after the discussions with him over this whole thing, I saw what that means. And oddly enough, the opportunities became more real. The work sold faster. There were more opportunities. Leo had made a -- what is it? He had said, "You have to go back into curating." I was like, "Over my dead body, I will." It was like, "Do you -- have you --" I was like, "I know you've had to work with artists before. Artists are crazy. They talk back. I talk back, so I know they talk back." (laughs) "You know, they believe they know better than you, and you know, and I'm still an unknown artist." It's like, you know, "I'm still trying to become relative for the world to see me. Why do that?" He's like, "Trust me, you'll see." So I ended up getting -- I, oddly enough, soon after that conversation, I got an opportunity to be curator-in-residence for the [House of Pride] Connection Center in Jersey City. Through a -- it was through an interesting conversation with the then interim director. His name is escaping me now, unfortunately, but anyway. So I took it on, and -- it was, again, it was a great experience. So, it became easier and easier and easier to do it. And with each show, there was more media attention. There were sales of the artwork. And I began to have more of a real presence as an artist that I liked. And it then also made it easier for my

own work to be exhibited in places because of that. And I think the way the art world works now is really based on -- it is -- with any job or career, it's connections. And what you've done, and what things you're about to do, or whatnot. But again, as before, we had the actual interview process here, there was Richard [Allman], with the Brooklyn Community Pride Center, saw a few of my exhibits at [Hudson] Pride Center. And he loved the way I think about exhibits and how to put things on the walls, or whatnot. To me, it's just second nature to do this stuff, so I don't think that it's really anything special at all, it's just something that I do. But he was like, "Oh, this would be great at the Brooklyn Pride Center, and you should check us out. And, you know, here's the executive director's email address. You should send her an email." And I was like, "Well, just let her know that I will be contacting her soon," or whatnot. But I emailed her, and we spoke briefly on the phone soon after. She responded back right away, and then we spoke briefly on the phone, and then [00:25:00] we ended up meeting. And this is when they were still on Atlantic Avenue, here in downtown Brooklyn. And the space literally was the size of a small one-bedroom apartment. At the time before they moved into the current space that's on Willoughby. Right in the heart of downtown Brooklyn. So, I was like, well, I've worked with tighter places before (laughs) so this is not going to be so bad. And I had produced the -- through Leonidesarts, through a lot of the artists that are connected with Leonidesarts, rather -- we did "You Are Here." And it was also part of their holiday party. And people really liked the idea of art being at the center. And then when they eventually moved, months later, [Erin Drinkwater], who is the current executive director of Brooklyn Pride Center, she wanted the exhibits to continue.

And ever since then, I've been now creating shows along with [Sara Hartsell], who is the program director that's there. And we kind of take turns with the aspect of what gets shown, and who. And they really are, right now, wanting mostly Brooklyn artists to be exhibited there. And I think it's a great idea, because I think a lot of times -- and also, artists that are not necessarily LGBTQ, either. And I definitely made that a point. Both in -- for Jersey City and here in Brooklyn, it's like, I think that even though this is a gay center, it's best when you invite everyone. Because that just -- it just makes it -- I look at

it from the aspect of you get farther by including others that are not -- they don't walk the same -- walk in the same shoes you do. Do you know? And also, you'll get a different audience of people as well that comes, and will buy work. And also appreciate what the Center does for its constituents or whatnot. You know, I do believe that -- again, arts does bring people together, and I think in this context, it's important that I was able to contribute doing this for the Center, because it's -- it's a way of education. It's a way of also enlightening people. And I've had some great conversations with people that were not necessarily in the art business. Sometimes I feel like having a conversation with them becomes dreadful and boring, (laughter) I feel better off speaking to someone who, this is not their life at all. And the perceptions that they have of what they see are, to me, far more vivid than the usual bullshit you hear from -- you know, a fellow scholar in your -- in whether my career or not.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: So.

REBECCA JACOBS: So that's great. And then you've been exhibiting your work. You had a thing in Houston recently, right?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yes.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: I did. With the East End Studio Gallery.

REBECCA JACOBS: And so, what is your -- I mean, what have you been working on recently, in terms of what you make?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Right now, the work is -- I'm getting into the idea of mythology as a narrative. I think I'll be starting with Greek mythology first, because it was the first mythology that I found very interesting, growing up. And all of that stuff is interconnected in many ways. But I just find, like, the aspect of mythology, and I think mythology is also rooted in religion as well. It helps to explain sometimes the most strange aspects of existence. It gives it a humanistic viewpoint. And whether people believe in it or not, it doesn't -- that's not what really matters to me. People know what it is. You know? So, and I do believe that it will -- this will turn into an even bigger body of work that does speak on the aspect of religion. But only poetically. Not politically,

poetically. My emphasis as an artist is always poetry. I don't want to -- I do not want to come across as some militant, angry, black gay man that's, you know -- it's very easy -- it would be very easy for me to do that as a person. And in some instances, people could say, I mean, you could easily be [00:30:00] that way, because of this, that, and the other. And for me, that's just not the case.

REBECCA JACOBS: Do you get pressure, or sort of assumptions?

RICARDO FRANCIS: I have before.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And I find that -- again, that only comes from my -- from my own group of people. And again, it goes back to the -- in the beginning of the conversation, that we had, we've been having with each other, is that, I don't wish to do that. I wish to just be me. That's more important. There's one time -- I'll never forget this story. I had organized an exhibit of a fellow classmate of mine at one of the churches I was with in high school. The artist's name is [Carlos Martinez], and I think Carlos still lives in Harlem. I've seen him a couple of times here, which is kind of funny. We don't really keep in contact very much, but I mean, to make a long story short, I absolutely loved his work, and I was like, "Oh, I'd love to curate a show of yours." And I had sent them a proposal with the church that I was with, to do a series of art exhibits, most of which were, like, fellow classmates of mine from high school, whatnot. So anyway, they agreed. And so I put up the show, and literally all of the -- my classmates came to the opening, and -- or whatnot. And I remember there was a Deacon's meeting, and the head of the Deacons there was outraged that all of these people that were not typical people that were there had come. So I was angry, actually. And I said to him, I was like, "Did you not read the proposal that I gave you?" And on top of that, I was like, "You have possibly people that may end up wanting -- maybe spiritual salvation. They may end up coming here for that. And didn't Jesus teach everyone to help each other and to become more enlightened, and to become more aware of their brother or their sister or this, that, and the other. This is a great way of doing that." I was like, "For a church to be giving an art exhibit like this --" and some churches actually, in Houston did do that, or whatnot. But it was, for them, this was for them a shock. But you see it repeatedly in history that

anything that's new becomes a shocking situation. But I remember vividly there was a -- the church secretary -- I just remember her first name being -- no, Gertrude. Yeah. She said -- she pulled me to the side. She's like, "Ricky," she was like, "Don't be disheartened by this. They're just stuck in the past." It's like, "But remember, you -- like, you -- what you're doing is the same thing that many people in the civil rights did, and that was for black people to be integrated into the rest of society. So continue doing what you're doing, and you're on the right path. And this is the right thing to do." And I think from that moment, I had always kept that as a reason for continuing, and not giving upon the aspect of sharing my own story, and the story of other people, through art and through exhibits. You know? But again, you can not -- being angry, I don't see how that works. You can express anger and enragement through art. But I think that can be done poetically. I really do. I really believe that. But to stay in that bubble, to fuel the work in that way, does not work. It only will hurt the artist eventually in the end, I believe.

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow. I really appreciate hearing all of your insights into this. It's really great. I guess I just have one question I want to make sure I follow up on from --

RICARDO FRANCIS: Sure.

REBECCA JACOBS: -- way earlier, which was Spanish, and we never talked about learning at as an adult. So it's a little bit random, but I'm just curious.

RICARDO FRANCIS: OK. (laughs)

REBECCA JACOBS: At this point I don't want to forget it.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Oh, no. I -- at the time -- ah, what year was this? 2004, I think.

[00:35:00] My then-lover, Benny, we had just -- I had just finished like a show in Soho. And we were scheduled to go to -- to go to Spain. And luckily for me, most people there knew English. But for me, I was like, "I have to learn Spanish. I have to learn Spanish. I have to learn Spanish (inaudible) Spanish." By, I would say, we were there for three weeks. And by the second week, I had, like, I need to find a book. Just so that I can begin the process. I think for whatever reason, going there -- and that was a great trip. I must say, he -- he was very good at organizing the whole thing. And we stayed at really great hostels, or whatnot. And I, again -- I got to see a lot of great art. There was the Prado, there was the -- oh, God, I can't remember the name of this museum, [Tissen]

something. And also I got to see the Picasso Museum that was -- is in Barcelona, I believe. And some paintings that I always saw in art history books were right there. I mean, the one that left a really lasting impression was Picasso's "Guernica." And you know, I always make fun of Picasso, because I always think that most of the work from his late life got -- through most of his career was garbage. (laughs) And I probably will have some hate mail from this interview (laughing) for that. But that piece, in person, completely beats what you see in a book, or online. You have to see it in person. It just - - you -- it took my breath away. I could tell that he was at that time still a passionate, courageous artist. And although I have my -- again, my criticisms of him. And I think he's -- I do believe that Picasso was very important, and a very good artist, for the most part. I just think that he probably got so famous so fast, and with so much money. And a lot of times the work tends to [seed] when that happens, and it's kind of hard to keep the - - the fire going when all of these entrapments are given to you. And it's difficult. I think with every art-- with every major artist that has been given sort of the brevity to sort of relax, and they've got the money in the bank or whatnot, then when they approach the next things, a lot of times, the fire may not be there. Sometimes it may be there, depending on what the project is.

REBECCA JACOBS: Right.

RICARDO FRANCIS: But sometimes they just stay within a particular pattern, and it never grows. I think that -- but I think, again, with that trip, getting back to the question, the trip taught me that, like, OK, it's time. I just -- you -- I got to learn it. You know? And slowly but surely, it's like I -- when I came back to the States, when I came back to New York, I got a wonderful book. Oh... It's kind of -- it's basically how to learn Spanish. And it's in a completely different way. And I think the author is [Madrigal] -- [Margarita Madrigal]. And I would say -- and believe it or not, I'm still working through the book. It's a huge -- it feels like an encyclopedia, actually.

REBECCA JACOBS: Wow.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And it's -- a small one. A small-sized encyclopedia, but I would say, within the first few weeks of reading it, I did really get a more genuine understanding of the language. But as one guy I dated said, he's like, "The best way to learn a language is

just to be thrown in it. And you just have to be forced into it.” And still to this day, like, the day job that I have now, I have one woman who -- a janitor, who she -- for the first five minutes, we speak only in Spanish.

REBECCA JACOBS: That’s great.

RICARDO FRANCIS: And she wants me -- just the same as she wants me -- she wants me to teach her English, I learn different phrases, or different words from her in Spanish. So, what better way to learn about mankind than through language?

REBECCA JACOBS: That’s great that you have that exchange.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. But, again, I think this is the aspect of -- my friend Leo -- it’s interesting you say that, because my Leo says all the time, with people, like certain people are not talked to at all. So say, if it’s a janitor, or [00:40:00] someone that’s in a particular position in life. A lot of times, they probably came from a different country where they were something -- someone else. And they come here, and they are not awarded the same abilities as they did there. So they had to kind of almost be demoted in many ways. And you know, for me, I just think of the aspect of people is that of either they’re warm and they’re sharing and they’re a good person, or some people choose to not want to connect at all, or they choose to be whatever they choose to be or whatnot. I think it’s best to try to -- I -- my feeling is that it’s best to try to connect with everyone as much as possible. You never know what you may learn. Even -- sometimes learning from your enemy is even a good thing, too. I wish the UN (laughs) and presidents and prime ministers understood that concept (laughter) but, you know. I mean, it’s -- you have to sometimes go outside of your own comfort zone. And for me, I think sometimes -- and I work at a law office as my day job. And that was completely out of my comfort zone. I would think that -- I always had a perception of lawyers as being a particular way. And I learned right away that at least in this particular law office that they are -- most of the times, they are not the stereotypes that people make them out to be. And that they can be humane. But also, it’s just interesting to see the dynamic of the exchanges between people. You know? And I like to break all those barriers out and down, you know? You can speak to a king or a queen, and find the same thrilling experience as talking to a janitor, or to a person that works in the garden, or picks up -- what was it?

Sanitation work, or is a police officer, or a fireman, or whatnot. To me, it's all part of life, and the human experience. And they all mean something to some degree. So...

REBECCA JACOBS: That's beautiful.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah. Thank you. (laughter)

REBECCA JACOBS: Thank you. So I guess I don't have any other questions, if there's anything you want to add, but...

RICARDO FRANCIS: I think that's it.

REBECCA JACOBS: Yeah?

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: That's a really nice way to end. So...

RICARDO FRANCIS: Yeah.

REBECCA JACOBS: Well, thank you so much.

RICARDO FRANCIS: Thank you. [00:42:37]

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