

Coral Way Elementary School Bilingual Program
Catherina Frances Poerschke, March 14, 2008
UAL_080314_Poerschke, 35:09 minutes
Interviewed by Richard Ruiz
Recorded by Bess DeFarber in Kendall, Florida
For University of Arizona, Louise Greenfield
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Tucson, Arizona
Transcribed by Jardee Transcription, Tucson, Arizona

Ruiz: This is an interview about Coral Way. It has to do with our Coral Way Project.

We're in Miami—actually we're in Kendall, is that right?

Poerschke: Uh-huh.

Ruiz: And it is March 14, 2008. My name's Richard Ruiz, [unclear]. Bess DeFarber is also in the room. And go ahead and please state your name.

Poerschke: Catherina Frances Poerschke.

Ruiz: So can you tell us what years you were at Coral Way?

Poerschke: I started Coral Way in the second grade, so probably.... Let's see, probably '62, '63.

Ruiz: So the second grade. And then you went until when?

Poerschke: Through the sixth grade.

Ruiz: At Coral Way?

Poerschke: Uh-huh.

Ruiz: Then I guess those were the only years, right?

Poerschke: Yes, Coral Way was the elementary, and at that time sixth grade was still in the elementary school.

Ruiz: Do you remember why it is that you went to Coral Way?

Poerschke: Yes, we have my mother to thank for that. Actually, I went to Silver Bluff Elementary for first grade, but my mother knew Mr. Logan, the principal at Coral Way Elementary, and I don't know how long she had been trying to get me into Coral Way, but I guess it was for some time. She wanted me enrolled in the bilingual program. Evidently Mom knew all about it, and so finally she was able to get me in. I was not actually in that school district, but she got me in, and I started in the second grade.

Ruiz: So was Spanish spoken in your home, or not?

Poerschke: No, Spanish was not spoken in my home. I was born and raised in Miami, my mom's a native Miamian also. But, you know, the times were changing back then, and a lot of Hispanics were living in South Florida, and I think my mom just felt it would probably be quite beneficial to try to learn another language. I think that's probably why she decided to try to get me into Coral Way.

Ruiz: You were in the English group, is that right? You were assigned to the English group?

Poerschke: English group, I guess, if that's the group where English was your native language—that would have been my group then, yes.

Ruiz: But you don't know on what basis? They didn't test you or they didn't come to your mother and say, "What language is used?" or any of that kind of thing?

Poerschke: I don't really recall if that was asked.

Ruiz: You wouldn't have known as a student, right, why. Do you remember some of your friends in school?

Poerschke: Oh, a **lot** of my friends. As a matter of fact, I still have contact with several. Bess, of course—we met in second grade—along with Summer Dowda [phonetic], whom

I haven't seen in years, but I'm looking forward to reconnecting to a lot of my friends. But I can remember Bessie, and Summer and I, we would either go over to Bess' after school, because she lived right across the street, and Summer lived right on the corner, and we spent a lot of time together. I can remember we would even go.... We'd take the bus, that un-air-conditioned bus. We went to Coral Gables. We'd walk Miracle Mile for hours on end, and back then there was no cell phone, no pager, no nothing, and my mom wasn't evidently too worried about doing things back then. We had fun. We had a lot of fun, we did a lot of things at school. I can remember we used to have some kind of fair or something. I can't remember the name of it, but I can remember that was the first time I ever tried the plantain chips, and I thought those were fantastic. I had a lot of friends: Tatiana Moreno, I met her in the sixth grade. Actually, I don't know, I think Tatia and I met—I want to say it was before, but she can probably tell you, because I know she came from New York. But we developed a real good friendship. To this day, as a matter of fact, Tatia and I talk. We do call often, but we still see each other. Oh gosh, I'm trying to think of who else I saw back then. I'll think of it as time goes on, because a lot of the kids that I met, that I went to school with in elementary school, I also went to Shenandoah with—Shenandoah Junior High—and also went to Miami High. So we kept in touch. I can remember Joe Moorman [phonetic]. Joe Moorman was one of my good friends back then. Those were happy times back in Coral Way—it was fun.

Ruiz: Do you remember the language that you used with your friends?

Poerschke: Mostly I used English at school, but I can remember when I would go home, we had several Spanish tenants. My mother and grandmother had rental property, and I can remember being small, and how proud my grandmother was, and my mom also, that I

was learning Spanish, so when they would come to pay the rent, they would want me to talk in Spanish. And of course being a small kid, I thought, “Oh, how embarrassing this is.” But you know, I’d say a few words. I could communicate. The tenant was always real happy that there was somebody there that was speaking their language; and my mom and my grandma were so proud because there I was speaking something that I wasn’t even familiar with. I was small, you know.

Ruiz: Did that interaction with your family over the years, as you were going through Coral Way, did it ever change in terms of language, or did you always interact with them in English?

Poerschke: Always English. Nobody else in my family spoke Spanish. My brother, he’s almost five years older than I am. He was taking German. He never took Spanish. He took German at Miami High and he didn’t do well. I think he even flunked out the first six weeks. But he never got into the language like I did. You know, I would come home, and I would always share what I learned in school that day with my mom. She was really my staunch supporter. She really believed in academics. My mom had graduated from the University of Miami, she had taught for a while, she actually majored in fine arts. But she really believed education was very important, but we never really talked, had conversations or anything. I mean, I could talk to my friends on the phone, if I had to. Or if I went somewhere at a grocery store, I could talk, and I understood. As a matter of fact, nowadays my comprehension is much better than my speaking ability because it’s like anything you learn: if you don’t practice it, you kind of lose a little. So I need a little fine tuning, but that was the basis for me.

Ruiz: I know it's a little bit hard for the young child as a student somewhere, but did you have any sense of the importance of this program as you were going through it, or as you went through it, the kind of historic significance of the school, or anything of that sort?

Poerschke: Not at all. That never even entered my mind. I know it was obviously important to my mother to have me learn another language, but being at Coral Way and being in this bilingual program, I had no idea how much of an impact this would have later on, at all.

Ruiz: How much has that changed up to now? Do you know now how important this is?
[unclear]

Poerschke: Now, after having spoken with you and Bess, now I'm going to have to do some reading on my own to see how much of an impact we made in history, because like I said, I had no idea, I was clueless, clueless.

Ruiz: We get the impression that that's true of lots of people—not just then, but even now—that there's no real—it doesn't have an impact on people when they talk about their elementary school. Let me ask you a little bit about the program itself and how you recall it. What was your day like, as you went into, let's say, the second grade or the third grade, or whatever it is that you remember.

Poerschke: Well, really, the sixth grade stands out more to me than the others, because we were in the pod then, which was the pod unit that they had built outside of the main school. And that was a big deal, because it was brand new, and we had the three teachers in that pod. And there wasn't much of any dividers between the classes. I mean, we were just one, huge, big pod, and Mrs. Mikes, Mrs. Sotolongo, I think, was in there, and Mrs. Sanchez, Senora Sanchez. And I can remember that was like the first time I think

we ever really.... I think we used to exchange seats during the day, if I can remember, but a portion of our day was spent addressing English subjects, things in English. And then subjects in Spanish. I can remember doing the spelling: *autographia*, and learning the letters and verbs. Oh my God, the verb tenses! As a matter of fact, I still think I have that folder somewhere. That I kept, I think. But it was a loud classroom many times—I can remember that—and Senora Sanchez would be yelling sometimes. And Mrs. Sotolongo also had a very loud, piercing voice, but the kids, we were really good kids, and we had fun. It was just a real interesting learning experience. I mean, to have a classroom—I don't know how many kids were in that classroom—but if you figure there were maybe thirty.... We had probably ninety kids or so in that huge pod. But I can remember we would learn certain things in the English language, and then we had certain subjects we learned in the Spanish language. I know we had some science, we had social studies and things like that. We actually still were learning writing back then, where they still did that. They don't do that in school anymore. But it was a day where really I would always describe it, when someone would ask me, "Where did you learn how to speak Spanish?" I would say, "Oh, at Coral Way in the bilingual program." They said, "Oh, what's that?" I said, "Well, that's where I had half a day in English and half a day in Spanish." That's really what I kind of thought, and they were all like.... The people I talk to here, they had no idea about this bilingual program. I mean, it was so many years ago. Most of the people now weren't even here then. So it's kind of a phenomena, I guess.

Ruiz: So you remember it more or less 50-50.

Poerschke: That's the way I remember it, 50-50, yeah.

Ruiz: But the people you mentioned just now were all your Spanish teachers, I think, isn't that right?

Poerschke: Yes, well, other than Mrs. Mikes. It's like sixth grade just stood out. The rest of it's almost now kind of a blur. But sixth grade was really, I guess, the most important grade.

Ruiz: And maybe by sixth grade you were a little bit more proficient in the language, it was easier to handle, and all that.

Poerschke: I can remember I always stood very well in Spanish. My mom always used to say, wow, it was like a natural for me, because I always had such a good accent back then. I mean, I can still roll my "R's" and all that kind of stuff. And actually, if I talk a sentence, some people kind of look like, "Wow." They would never know I'm actually an English speaker, that's my first language.

Ruiz: Do you remember the materials that you used in classes—books, handouts, whatever—and what languages they were in?

Poerschke: It's hard to think about what the books were. I can remember we had *Weekly Readers* back then. Those were always fun. I can't.... I know we had Spanish books. I can't really remember.

Ruiz: You had Spanish books in the sixth grade [unclear].

Poerschke: I think we did, yeah. I believe we did. I can't remember [unclear].

Ruiz: And you also had, what, writing exercises in two languages?

Poerschke: Uh-huh, and if I remember back then, I think they had.... I want to say they used a projector in our classrooms back then, because with so many kids in the room.... I'm just thinking we had a projector back then.

Ruiz: Tell me how that worked with the three teachers. It wasn't disruptive?, because you were all in one big room.

Poerschke: All in one big room, but yet we all got our work done. Like I said, you had to have some sense of decorum in order to get anything accomplished, having that many kids and only three adults in that room—but we did, and everything seemed to work very well. I can still see me sitting in that pod today.

Ruiz: Did the three groups ever come together for some large activity? Did you ever do anything together with the other groups?

Poerschke: I really can't see that in my mind, but it seems like we probably did at some point. I mean, I know there was always a sharing of information, and I know that we moved. Like I said, we moved into different seats at times during the day. But we never had a problem with not being able to hear the teacher or do our work.

Ruiz: Did you ever participate in any kind of extracurricular or after-school, before-school, activities, sports clubs, or other kind of clubs, or journalism clubs or anything of that sort?

Poerschke: You know, if I was, I can't remember what kind of clubs we had back then at Coral Way. I don't even know if we had any. If we did, I guess I wasn't a participant, because it doesn't stand out in my mind. I know I wasn't such a great fond of P.E. I remember that much, because I didn't like goin' out to that field in that hot heat.

Ruiz: Did they have a cafeteria?

Poerschke: Oh yeah. Twenty-five cents for lunch. Great food. Nice- sized portions too. I remember that much.

Ruiz: Did they have any rules about language use or anything like that there? Or was it just free flowing?

Poerschke: I can remember the cafeteria being loud. I can't remember if there were any rules about what languages to speak. I can remember lining up to go into the cafeteria, and lining up to go back to class. I can remember that. And I was always usually at the back of the line, because I was always one of the big, tall kids.

And this is off on a tangent, but this just jogged a memory. See, my birthday's on April 1st, so that always got a lot of laughter. And I can remember one year—maybe it was fourth grade—fourth or fifth grade maybe—I know somebody said to the teacher, whom I cannot remember, “Oh, today's Cathy's birthday!” and she thought it was just a big joke, like someone was playing an April Fools joke. I remember that much! But cafeteria, I just remember it was loud—loud in the cafeteria.

Ruiz: You don't remember if there were kind of natural groups that formed outside of the classrooms—Spanish speakers, English speakers or other groups of that sort?

Poerschke: We all got along really well. We all intermingled, because actually, to tell you the truth, I think most of my friends that I developed close relationships with, were Spanish. Bess was not English speaking. She came from an Argentinean background, if I remember correctly. I know her mom and her dad didn't speak much English. I can remember goin' over there to their house a lot. Becky Porto, Gladys Diaz, we were like the Three Musketeers there for a long time. We were heavy into “Star Trek” at the time. I'm trying to think. Really, it's funny, I think—I don't know whether I gravitated towards them for any reason. I don't really think it had anything to do with what languages we were speaking. And I can remember some kids in our class had more

difficulty than others with the English. But I think most of my friends actually probably were Spanish speakers.

Ruiz: Do you remember any participation of your parents in school activities of any sort?

Poerschke: Let's see.... Well, my mom worked a lot. She worked alongside of my grandmother. They had a lot of rental property they dealt with. I can remember my mom going to school for, probably it was PTA meetings. Oh! I just remembered something else. It must have been fifth grade. We were not in the pod, so it was probably fifth or fourth. Whatever.... Okay, I think.... Oh, it was Senora Sanchez, so I know I had her for another class. I had her as another teacher. It was either fourth or fifth grade. I know the class my mom came to that morning was in the front of the school, it was on the east side of the school. I had gotten a check mark in conduct, and I **never** got check marks, **ever**. I was too afraid to talk in class. I was so upset when I got home with that report card, and with that check mark, my mother came to school that next morning. And I can remember the reason I got the check mark was because whoever was with me at the table was talking, so I got the check mark too. And it was like.... I never misbehaved. I was just not one who misbehaved, so I can remember my mom coming to school specifically that one time for that. But the check mark still stayed, but nonetheless, my mom had to come and talk about that.

Ruiz: So you don't remember your parents or any parents being invited into the school or into the classroom, or to talk about what they did, or who they were, or any of that sort of thing?

Poerschke: Well, my mom was a single parent. I know, obviously, she must have had to come to school to talk to Mr. Logan about the program. Obviously my mom knew much more about the program than.... I mean, I had no clue. I just knew that I was going to be leaving Silver Bluff after first grade and going to Coral Way Elementary, and I knew that I was going to be learning Spanish.

Ruiz: Do you remember any community kinds of activities for the community around the school—an open house or a picnic or something like that where they invited the community in?

Poerschke: I do remember there were open houses. My mom did come to the open houses, because I can remember my work being displayed, and my mom talking about it. There was something we used to have every year. It was in the courtyard there. They'd set up booths. I can't remember what the name of the event was, but it was like some fair or something. But there were booths set up, and there was all this wonderful Spanish food. I think I got my first introduction to paella there. I know my mom and my grandma and my brother would come to that. I can't remember too much about it.

Ruiz: What about any large whole-school sorts of things—a rally or a big meeting or whatever—where the principal came and spoke to the whole school at one time, or anything of that sort?

Poerschke: They had morning announcements. We didn't have like an auditorium or anything, but we had the cafeteria.

Ruiz: I'm wondering whether or not there were any.... For example, the announcements, were they in English and Spanish, or were they just in English? Do you remember the language of the announcements?

Poerschke: You know, I can't remember back then about the announcements. But you know, the fact that we had so many Spanish children at that school, and the Spanish teachers, I would not—I mean, I can't actually remember hearing it, but it would not surprise me that they did the announcements both in English and Spanish.

Ruiz: Finally, about the program itself, do you remember, besides the overhead projector which you were talking about, do you remember any other kind of technology that was used?

Poerschke: Technology?

Ruiz: Films, filmstrips.

Poerschke: Filmstrips! I can remember we had filmstrips back then. There were filmstrips. Projector. Well, we still had blackboards or greenboards back then. I know we had handouts.

Ruiz: Were the films or filmstrips informational, or were they actual films about some story, or do you remember any of that?

Poerschke: Oh, gosh, I don't know. Not at this moment I can't remember.

Ruiz: They didn't use Spanish language films or anything like that to peak your interest or stimulate people?

Poerschke: You know, the funny thing now, as I'm trying to recall, so much of.... To me it was just.... See, you're looking for like all the specifics, and for me, that was just my regular day. So things that probably you're looking to find, to connect with, or that are noteworthy, to me it was just the regular day of school. Unless something really occurs to me later, I don't know, I can't think of anything right now.

Ruiz: Okay. Let me ask you about your impressions of the program as you went through it. I'll also ask you later about your impressions now, if you think it was a good experience or not. But how did you feel about going to Coral Way? Did you feel good about it? Was it enjoyable? Was it a chore? Were you confused?

Poerschke: Definitely there was no confusion. It was probably—other than for being in band in high school, going to Coral Way was probably the best years of my life. Because, of course, that's where you really—that's your first socialization, you begin to form friendships with people. And it was a great time back then. I enjoyed going to classes, I enjoyed most all of my teachers that I can remember. I learned a lot, and it probably didn't sink in how beneficial it was for me to have gone through that program, until I went through the rest of my education. When I went to Shenandoah, I took at least two classes in seventh, eighth, and ninth grade that were in Spanish. I can remember I took world culture in Spanish. I might have some of those folders somewhere. Science, I took biology in Spanish. There were quite a few things that I took in Spanish. But when I got to Miami High, I took the Spanish classes for Spanish speakers. I was not in a Spanish class of English speakers. I was in a class where all of them were Hispanic except for me. There was one other kid, one other guy, Tim O'Brien, in Miami High. He was raised in an American household, but I forgot where he was born. He looked like a typical Irish guy, but he spoke Spanish just as well as the next Spanish child. And the thing was, I always did very well. My whole three years at Miami High I was in Spanish classes for Spanish speakers, those whose native language was Spanish. And when I applied to go to the University of Miami, I actually got a few CLEP credits and I was actually put into an advanced reading class to finish out my language requirement. That

wouldn't have happened if I hadn't gone to Coral Way and learned it from the beginning. You know, when you learn a language when you're so young, it's so much easier. I was able to make that connection with the language itself. To me it just came naturally.

As a matter of fact, my daughter, I put her in a preschool here in town that the ladies who ran the preschool were Spanish, and my daughter now is sixteen, and she's got a **fabulous** accent, her comprehension is marvelous, and that was all because she was learning Spanish at a young age, and it came naturally to her as well. There was no confusion. There was absolutely no confusion.

My only confusion now is the fact that I've not practiced it and I can't think of the right verb tense to use. But I know what I want to say. It's just so frustrating, I can't get it out of my mouth. I understand what they're talking to me about, it's just I can't find the right verbs to use. And I tell you what, almost every Latin person who hears me speak back to them in Spanish, they look at me, because I don't look Hispanic, and they ask me either, "Where were you born?" or "Where did you learn to speak?" That's all due to Coral Way.

Ruiz: Have you ever gone back to Coral Way?

Poerschke: Oh my gosh, I've passed the front of the school several times, maybe the last time was maybe eight years ago. But I actually physically have not been back there, probably since I left.

Ruiz: Maybe we can get a reunion together.

Poerschke: Oh wow, that would be fantastic.

Ruiz: So I assume that you're still feeling good about your participation then?

Poerschke: Oh my gosh! I'm telling you! Tatiana I met at Coral Way. I have her. These are people I've had friends for over forty years. And it was such an opportunity, but I didn't know that. I didn't know that. And where we lived in Miami-Dade County, my gosh, if you can't speak another language.... I mean, you really need to know another language when you're here. You walk into any store, and rather than speak English to you, they're gonna speak Spanish to you. Of course you have a lot of the English-speaking Americans that take offense to that, but you know what? *C'est la vie*. At least, hey, some of the Spanish people that are living here, they have tried to learn English. There's a lot of them that there's no need for them to learn English. Everywhere they go, they can converse in their native language. It wasn't like back then, when you had the young Spanish kids here—you didn't **have** a lot of Spanish speakers here in Dade County. And they were **forced** to have to really try to *habla en inglés*. But, you know, it is a marvelous thing that my mother got me the bilingual education. It has helped me. I lived in Texas for almost nine years, and I worked for the mechanical engineering department at Texas A&M, and I can't tell you the number of graduate students that I was able to help a little bit more because there they were, they spoke another language, and you're dealing with **engineers**. So it was helpful to them that they had somebody that actually understood 'em, and they felt a little more at home. I'll tell you what, I am so thankful, **so** thankful that my mother got me into that school. And I'll tell you what, if I could have done that same thing for my daughter, I would have. But I did the next best thing: I was fortunate enough—I didn't even really know it—but putting her in that preschool, that was her foundation. Because she's following in my footsteps as well. When she went to first grade in public school, they put her in a Spanish

class of Spanish speakers. Now, that's phenomenal. Actually, when she went into first grade, she wasn't even six yet. She learned to read early. She was in kindergarten for three weeks before they moved her into first grade. She was actually reading to the other kids in kindergarten. So it was phenomenal.

Ruiz: Let me ask you—and I think this is my last question—if there's one experience, or one kind of experience at Coral Way that really stands out as the most enjoyable thing that you did, the most enjoyable **kind** of thing that you did, or conversely, the hardest or the thing that you enjoyed least at Coral Way.

Poerschke: Well, least, I didn't like P.E. But the most enjoyable thing I think was the time spent before class, and when we got out of school, where we all could just be with our friends. I can remember they had hopscotch things on the cement on the north side of the cafeteria, and in the morning they were by the big trees, I know we would play hopscotch. Life back then was simple. It was simple and slow and I enjoyed going to school. I don't think, other than for my grandma taking me out of school to take me down to her house in the Keys, which my mom was not so approving of, I don't think I missed very much school at all in elementary school—or actually, throughout my schooling. I **liked** going to Coral Way. And actually, I think at one time, one really nifty thing was when I was able to ride my bicycle to Coral Way—one of those old Huffy bicycles. But it was the time spent with my friends before and after school, I think, was the most fun, because we played on the trees out there. It's a beautiful school. I don't know what it looks like now, but it was a beautiful school back then. It was just great.

Ruiz: Well, great. Thank you for the interview. If there's anything else that occurs to you at some point, you have our contact information, and just let us know in any way: e-mail, call us, whatever.

Poerschke: I will.

Ruiz: That's great. Thank you very much for the interview.

Poerschke: You're very welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]