

Coral Way Elementary School Bilingual Program
Rebecca Porto, March 14, 2008
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Interviewed by Richard Ruiz
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For University of Arizona, Louise Greenfield
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Ruiz: This is an interview on the Coral Way Project, and it is March 14, 2008. It's about four o'clock in the afternoon, in Miami. Why don't you go ahead and state your name for the record.

Porto: My name is Rebecca Porto, P, as in Paul, O-R-T-O.

Ruiz: Great, thank you very much. I really want first to have you tell us a little bit about your experiences in Coral Way, what years you were there, and generally your experiences there, and then we'll ask you ask you much more specific questions.

Porto: I was there fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, which was graduating in 1968, so basically it was '66, '67, and '68. My other elementary years were at Shenandoah, which was a very different experience.

Ruiz: How is it that you got to Coral Way?

Porto: We moved, basically. We moved to the area that corresponded to the district for Coral Way. I was very lucky.

Ruiz: Did you move because of Coral Way, or it just happened that Coral Way was in the area you were moving?

Porto: No, we just happened to move because when my mother and I first came from Cuba in 1962, she and I came alone, and we lived in a little apartment, just the two of us.

And then in '65, my father, my aunt, and my grandmother came from Cuba, so we needed to move to a house to accommodate all of us.

Ruiz: Now, when you started to go to Coral Way, first of all, did you know that it was a bilingual school?

Porto: No.

Ruiz: Do you think that your parents knew that it was a bilingual school?

Porto: No.

Ruiz: So you started going there basically because it was your neighborhood school.

Porto: Correct.

Ruiz: For no, really, other reason.

Porto: Correct.

Ruiz: When you went there, did you have any sense that it was historic or significant in, as I say, the history of bilingual education, or anything of that sort?

Porto: Well, I was very young, but I knew it was very different from where I had been before, because I had been at Riverside and Shenandoah. Basically having come from Cuba, not speaking any English, I was thrown into a class where I didn't understand anything that was going on, and it was very traumatic. And then once I got to Coral Way, I was like, "Wow! this is great!" It was wonderful.

Ruiz: But beyond your own experience, you or your family didn't know, you didn't get some idea from some news agency or some brochure or something, this is an incredible place?

Porto: I had a sense at the time that it was some sort of pioneer program, and that we were the only ones. I believe that I **knew** that we were the only ones in the country, so I felt very fortunate that I just happened to land there by chance.

Ruiz: Good. And since then, have you had a sense that that was true, that it's a very important thing?

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: Because sometimes when people are going to school, or when they're working there, they're just working there—they're just going to school and working there, and that sense of history and the significance and so on sometimes doesn't touch people. Well, that's great. Can you tell me then something about what your day was like, kind of a typical day at Coral Way for you?

Porto: Yes. Obviously I don't remember too much detail, but just vaguely I remember that half the day was in Spanish, and half the day was in English. That may or may not be correct, but that was just my perception at the time, and I just thought it was so unique because it wasn't that you had a class in Spanish.... I mean, you had **any** subject matter in Spanish, whether it was math or history or.... The way I remember it, half the classes were taught in Spanish, and half were taught in English. And Spanish was my first language, obviously, so I thought that was pretty neat.

Ruiz: You were placed in which group, the Spanish group?

Porto: Yes, because Spanish was my primary language, and English was my second language.

Ruiz: So you know that that was the reason? I mean, they knew that Spanish was your first language?

Porto: I was fluent in Spanish because we only spoke Spanish at home. So I was fluent in Spanish.

Ruiz: Right. Sometimes it's not clear, though, how people got placed, because, for example, even if your first language was Spanish, but your last name was not obviously Spanish, sometimes you got put in the other group and so on.

Porto: I don't know how the choices were made.

Ruiz: I'm trying to figure out whether or not there was something more systematic, whether they had some kind of assessment or test or some proficiency thing that they put together, that would tell somebody, "Ah-ha, this person has to go over there, that person has to go over there." I'm not sure I'm getting that yet. I mean, I think it's just a sense that they had.

Porto: I don't recall any kind of like special test when I started Coral Way.

Ruiz: Let me just ask you then, the language you spoke at home was Spanish?

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: Was there any English spoken in your home at all?

Porto: No.

Ruiz: As you went through the program—and I know you were only there for a couple of years—but did that change, was there any **more** English, for example, that came into the home?

Porto: No.

Ruiz: You always spoke Spanish with your parents?

Porto: To this day, I only speak Spanish to my [mother]. My mother and I only speak in Spanish.

Ruiz: What about with your friends? You had friends in both groups, or mainly in the Spanish group?

Porto: Well, in my class, but we only spoke in English in school or outside of school—we only spoke in English.

Ruiz: That's interesting. So your friends were in your Spanish group, right?

Porto: I'm not sure. I mean, they were in my class. For example, I'm not sure, (to DeFarber) was Cathy in the Spanish group? No? My best friend was Cathy Poerschke, which I think you met today.

Ruiz: And she was in the English group. Interesting. So there was a lot of interaction among the students, regardless of the group. And your interaction with the students was in English.

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: Now, where did you pick up the English?

Porto: Well, I came when I was six years old, and I was thrown into Riverside Elementary, not speaking a word of English. I don't recall, obviously. I just remember that it was very traumatic, and my mother says that within three months I was fluent. And I don't know how I did it, I have no idea, because I would just sit there and not understand a word of what the teacher was saying. And it was very scary at the time. But somehow, I guess the brain at that age is an amazing thing.

Ruiz: Do you remember your teachers at Coral Way?

Porto: At Coral Way I remember Mrs. Benitez. I remember Mrs. Sotolongo, Mrs. Mikes, and Mrs. Sanchez.

Ruiz: Do you remember doing anything outside of school, with maybe school friends, maybe extracurricular activities or any of that sort of thing?

Porto: No. I don't recall any extracurricular activities at all. I mean, when I would get together with my friends, we would just get together, but nothing school related.

Ruiz: You said before that you thought the ratio of Spanish to English in the classroom was about 50-50?

Porto: That's the perception that I recall—it may or may not be accurate.

Ruiz: How was that distributed? Was it because you moved from one teacher to another, or because you moved from different subjects, or different time of day—do you remember that?

Porto: Well, I remember when in sixth grade it changed. Because in fourth and fifth grades we were in one class, with just one teacher, and she would be going back and forth. What I recall was that the morning was one language, and then after lunch was another language: whether it was Spanish-English or English-Spanish, that I don't recall.

Ruiz: This was in the fourth grade?

Porto: Fourth and fifth grades. Then sixth grade it changed because we moved to a new building, which was a very large area, where the three teachers were basically teaching three different groups at the same time, and we basically would move. The teacher would stay in her spot, and then we would move to the teacher as the subjects changed.

Ruiz: How did you know to move from one place to the other? Did everybody move at one time?

Porto: I guess we had a schedule, but I don't recall. I mean, there **must** have been a schedule.

Ruiz: Did you ever do anything as a large group in that big room? Did you ever sing songs or do several things together?

Porto: There was no singing songs. No songs. I always remember there were three groups, and each one was separate. That's what I recall.

Ruiz: What about the materials that you used in the class? Do you remember whether you had textbooks in both languages, or if the Spanish was a translation of the English? Do you remember anything of that sort?

Porto: Honestly, I don't recall. That I don't recall. What I **do** recall is that I did not have very much homework, because I had a lot of spare time after school. I had time to read on my own, I had time to play outside, I had time to watch TV, whereas my experience with my daughter was very different. She had so much homework we were up till ten o'clock at night doing homework every night.

Ruiz: So the work that you did in class then, was both oral work, but also written work, is that right?

Porto: I believe so.

Ruiz: And you wrote in both languages?

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: So how did you feel about writing in your second language, English, as opposed to writing in Spanish? Did you have formal training in writing in Spanish as well?

Porto: In Coral Way.

Ruiz: But not before that?

Porto: No, I don't think so.

Ruiz: So you were becoming fluent in English, your second language, you were very fluent in Spanish, but you were also writing in both of those languages.

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: Can you still read and write in both those languages?

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: Do you remember, in your home, if you had materials, or if you had any kind of media—television, radio, whatever—in both languages, or was it just one language? Was it in Spanish, or was it in fact English?

Porto: Back then, the media was all English. I don't recall any.... No, I stand corrected: There was a Spanish radio program, because my mother used to listen to that in the morning when we were getting ready for school: "*Rayo Relo*," tick-tock, tick-tock. But there was nothing in Spanish on TV back then.

Ruiz: Did you watch TV back then?

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: And so maybe some of your English you picked up through the media?

Porto: Well, by the time I got to Coral Way, I was already fluent in English.

Ruiz: Yes, but I mean reading as well.

Porto: Yes, I was an avid, avid reader. I read a lot.

Ruiz: What kinds of things did you read?

Porto: Science fiction, romance.

Ruiz: So books.

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: Magazines? Newspapers?

Porto: No magazines or newspapers. Books that I would check out from the library, basically.

Ruiz: Besides your homework, did you write things—stories, poems?

Porto: My journal. I used to write in a journal every day.

Ruiz: And this was not a school assignment?

Porto: No.

Ruiz: This was just something that you did because you liked to write?

Porto: This was my journal. Yes. I kept a journal. It's amazing that I was so meticulous. Every night! I mean, it was silly, two or three little lines, but every night I would write in my journal—basically what happened during the day.

Ruiz: In terms of your parents, do you remember them ever doing anything in the school or with the school or at the school?

Porto: No. Their only interaction was when I would bring home my report card, and there would be like a little comment on the back where it would say, "Rebecca needs to exercise more self control." And they'd say, "Self control," and they'd just sign off on the report card.

Ruiz: Is that an actual comment that you remember?

Porto: Oh yes. You can see for yourself.

Ruiz: So you remember these.

Porto: Oh yes, you can see for yourself.

Ruiz: What did that mean, "self control"?

Porto: I think I talked too much. (laughter) I think I still have that problem. I do recall my parents going to—there must have been like a parent night where my parents went to

school. Mrs. Sanchez did not like me, and she made a very nasty comment to my parents, and my parents were like flabbergasted, because she was wrong, she was totally wrong.

Ruiz: Are you sure she didn't like you, or you just thought then that she didn't like you?

Porto: No, I **know** that she did not like me. I'm quite clear on that. She misconstrued, I think, who I was.

Ruiz: Was there any kind of technology that you used in the classroom, if you remember? Any films, filmstrips, anything?

Porto: The only thing there was, was the overhead projector—you know, that you have those clear pages on. And then I remember one time Mrs. Sanchez I guess used a Kodachrome projector. I guess it was sort of like an art history. She was showing us pictures of Spanish paintings. That really had an impact on me.

Ruiz: What kind of impact?

Porto: I was intrigued. There was this world that I knew nothing about.

Ruiz: So these were the Spanish painters and all that?

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: And what all that meant, and so on.

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: We'll have to tell her about that. She also thought that that was a great part of the experience that she gave to the students.

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: So you don't remember any specific sorts of things besides the report cards, that, for example, would be sent home to parents so that they could know what was going on

in the school, so that they would be invited to come to certain kinds of things at the school?

Porto: I know there was that parent-teacher night. I don't know if that was once a year or more than once a year, or if that was just at the beginning of the year. I don't know the frequency. I don't recall.

Ruiz: There was not like a regular newsletter or a little memo or something sent home to parents?

Porto: I don't think so.

Ruiz: I think I asked you this before, but you don't remember your parents actually coming into the classroom for anything, right?

Porto: Just for those parent-teacher nights. I recall that specific time, because when they came back, they were very upset. But I'm sure it was the same in fourth and fifth grades.

Ruiz: Let me ask you about your attitudes and impressions that you can remember about your experience then. Did you have good experiences, did you feel as if it was a good experience at Coral Way, or is it very mixed, or how is it that you remember feeling then, about your experience at Coral Way?

Porto: I think it was a wonderful experience. It was a wonderful experience. Because it was the only time in my life, for those three years, that I had formal training in Spanish. Because when I went later on in middle school and high school, I never took Spanish again, and yet I'm still completely bilingual. I can read and write in Spanish. And it has to be because of what I learned at Coral Way, that it was taught to me at a point in time where my brain sort of incorporated that into the permanent memory, and it has stayed with me.

Ruiz: And it was the sort of experience that kind of stays with you, right? Is that the idea?

Porto: Yes.

Ruiz: You said a little while ago that you had been frustrated with your other school because it was all in English and so on. So was part of being at Coral Way the fact that it was familiar, that there was not just the language, but the customs and the culture and so on was familiar?

Porto: It was almost like an acceptance that it's okay to speak Spanish. Because the first three years that I was here, it was like English, English, English, English, forget who you are. And all of a sudden it's like it's okay to speak Spanish, and it's okay to be fluent in your native language. You don't have to forget it. And I think that was very important.

Ruiz: What about the whole question of identity? Did it affect your sense of who you were, culturally speaking, when in your first school you were, if not prohibited from using your first language, at least English was what was most promoted. And then when you went to Coral Way, was it more than just language, was it also culture and other kinds of things—history and so on—that you....

Porto: Yes. Yes, obviously, because Mrs. Sanchez was teaching us Spanish art history. It was more than that.

Ruiz: But was it also specifically kind of Cuban identity that you thought about yourself, or was that not something that entered your mind?

Porto: Not necessarily. Because Spain, obviously, is the mother country for all the Spanish-speaking countries. So it was more of the mother country sort of a thing, the base of Spanish.

Ruiz: Who do you think were the people who helped you the most as you were going through this program: helped you in any particular way, helped you with some of the academic things, or helped you with some of the emotional adjustments or whatever?

Porto: Well Mrs. Benitez was wonderful. I remember her as being very sweet and very patient. Mrs. Mikes was very nice also. And I think even though Mrs. Sanchez, I perceived her to be nasty to me, I think in a way that sort of made me want to prove to her “I’m not who you think I am. I’m better than this.” And even though she never knew what I became.... Even though it was a negative thing, it drove me in a positive direction.

Ruiz: And I asked you to try to remember how you felt then about participating in the program. How do you feel now, looking back, about your participation in that program?

Porto: I feel very proud to have been part of that first class. It was like [being a] pioneer.

Ruiz: What do you remember in terms of the extremes, the things that you really enjoyed the most about the experience, and maybe those that you didn’t like as much?

Porto: That’s a little bit difficult, because honestly, the days were like a blur.

Ruiz: The kinds of things, maybe not specific events, but the kinds of things that you really liked doing.

Porto: I think the thing I remember the most was that in fifth grade I was chosen queen, the Queen of Fifth Grade, whatever that meant. And it was a big to-do. I rented this white dress and wore a little crown and everything. That was really neat.

Ruiz: Just kind of an affirmation from your classmates.

Porto: Yes. Or I guess the teacher. I’m sure it was the teacher.

Ruiz: Your other classmates—Bess wasn't jealous of you? (laughter)

Porto: (to DeFarber) Were you with me with Mrs. Benitez? I don't think so.

Ruiz: What about something you didn't enjoy very much.

Porto: I did not enjoy physical education, because my mother traumatized me, always saying, "Be careful, you're going to hurt yourself." So I did very poorly in phys ed, as you'll see in my report cards, because I was afraid to do anything. I just wouldn't participate. And that wasn't good. I was not multi-dimensional, as the kids are now. I was very monochromatic, all study and no physical activity.

Ruiz: This model that uses two languages as medium of instruction, it's something you experienced at Coral Way, at least for a few years. But you also went through a more traditional monolingual experience. How do you compare these in terms of your own experience, in terms of what really worked and what didn't work? I guess I'm interested in your impressions of how effective a two-language model is for schooling.

Porto: I think it's **very** effective. Even though, honestly, I have to say, I learned English, and I don't even know **how** I learned English, because it just somehow happened. Nobody took me aside, nobody gave me any special instruction. So by the time I got to Coral Way, I was already bilingual, but it was a very positive experience. Whereas my first three years, like first, second, and third grades, I don't remember feeling positive about those three years. It was sort of a scary time.

Ruiz: Do you think that it might be a more general kind of model for teaching everyone, or is it just good for some populations of students?

Porto: I'm not sure. It's definitely good for recent immigrants. I think in today's world, speaking two languages is very, very beneficial, no matter where you live. I mean, in

Miami it's a must. You have to speak both English and Spanish in Miami. In other countries, children know three and four languages. In the United States we have this idea that it's like English or bust. So I think it would be very beneficial.

Ruiz: When you left, you went from Coral Way to Shenandoah?

Porto: No, the other way around. Shenandoah was first, second, and third grades. Coral Way was fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. And then I went to Catholic School, I went to Saints Peter and Paul.

Ruiz: And then you went on to high school?

Porto: LaSalle.

Ruiz: Did you have any more of these sorts of bilingual experiences in school after that?

Porto: No, never again.

Ruiz: Were they available to you, or is it just not something....

Porto: No. It was a traditional school. You had the option of taking Spanish....

Ruiz: As a language.

Porto: Yes, as a language. But I felt that I didn't need it, that what they were going to teach me, I already knew. As a matter of fact, without having ever taken any Spanish in seventh, eighth, or through high school, I took the special test of SAT in Spanish, and I got a perfect score. So I knew that I didn't need to take their Spanish classes.

Ruiz: There's an SAT in Spanish? I didn't know that.

Porto: I don't know what they called it, but I remember there was a test at the end of high school. Basically, I guess, I don't know, maybe it's not an SAT, but it's sort of like something to earn college credit. Maybe there's another name for it.

Ruiz: Probably A.P.

Porto: CLEP! It's the CLEP.

Ruiz: So do you think this experience at Coral Way has had any kind of lasting effect into your life in terms of who you are and what your capabilities [are], and your going on to more schooling and so on?

Porto: Yes, definitely. And definitely as far as my identity. It validated my identity. I think that was very important. If I hadn't been in that program, maybe I would have forgotten where I came from, and tried to be 100% American.

Ruiz: Well, I think that's all the questions I have. Thank you very much. If there's anything else that occurs to you, if there are any other things that you find that might be of interest to us, you know how to get ahold of us, and we'd be happy to get anything more. We'll keep in contact with all of you as we're going through this. Thank you very much.

Porto: Very good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]