

Coral Way Elementary School Bilingual Program  
**Bess DeFarber**, March 11, 2008  
UAL\_080311\_DeFarber, 47:55 minutes  
Interviewed by Richard Ruiz  
recorded in Miami, Florida  
For University of Arizona, Louise Greenfield  
Special Collections and Archives  
Tucson, Arizona  
Transcribed by Jardee Transcription, Tucson, Arizona

**Ruiz:** This is an interview for the Coral Way Project, and it is March 11, 2008. It's about 6:15 at night, and the location of the interview is in a hotel room in Miami. What I'd like you to do now for me is to state your name into the record.

**DeFarber:** Bess DeFarber.

**Ruiz:** Okay. My name is Richard Ruiz, and I'm a university professor at the University of Arizona. So, I should say you have already received the questions that we have prepared for you for the interview, and we're going to try to go through each one of them with you, but you should know that during the course of the interview, there may be times when we'll ask for clarification or in other ways deviate from those questions. We've scheduled a meeting for one hour—could be shorter, could be longer, but if it's longer, it'll only be with your consent. The interview questions are in English. You can answer in English, or you can answer in Spanish, or both in some combination, whichever you would prefer. Please indicate into the recorder by saying “yes” or “no” that you freely consent to participate in this interview.

**DeFarber:** Yes.

**Ruiz:** Okay, thank you. So remember, you can take a break at any time, just let us know. You can also stop the interview at any time. So now I will ask you the questions

that we've prepared, and that you've already seen. So my sense is that you'll have a chance to elaborate on those answers.

The first set of questions is about more personal information that we'd like to get from you, aside from the questions that you've already answered electronically. Can you tell me what language was, or what languages were, spoken in your home when you were a student.

**DeFarber:** Spanish, English, and Yiddish.

**Ruiz:** Did this combination of languages change in any way as you went through the program?

**DeFarber:** There was probably less Yiddish and more English.

**Ruiz:** And by the time you ended the program, it was still some combination of the three languages?

**DeFarber:** It was more English and Spanish, pretty much equal English and Spanish in the home.

**Ruiz:** In your classes in the program, who were your teachers?

**DeFarber:** I need to refer to my report cards, and I brought them with me. I can say that.... I have to look for them. Can we pause for a minute? (recording paused) So in first grade I had Mabel Richardson. I only had one teacher. And then in second grade I had Mrs. Heidrick [phonetic] and Mrs. Gonzalez. And in third grade I had Mrs. Lecours [phonetic] and Miss Powers. And in fourth grade I had Mrs. Dye [phonetic] and Mrs. Sanchez. Then in fifth grade I had Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Murciano [phonetic]. And in sixth grade I had three teachers: Mrs. Sanchez, Mrs. Sotolongo, and Mrs. Mikes [phonetic].

**Ruiz:** Now, as a student in the program, you were assigned to either the Spanish group or the English group. To which group were you assigned?

**DeFarber:** I was in the English group.

**Ruiz:** Do you remember, or do you know, on what basis you were assigned to that group, as opposed to the other group?

**DeFarber:** I can only hypothesize that my English was very good by then, even though Spanish was my native language. I was primarily speaking English at home with my brother and with other kids. With my father certainly I was speaking English. So my English by second grade was very good. So I'm imagining that that's why they put me in the English speakers.

**Ruiz:** Do you remember who your friends were in school—your student friends, I mean.

**DeFarber:** Yes, they were mostly in the English speakers' group. Summer Dowda [phonetic] was my best friend. I had other friends: Elizabeth Freeman, Gail Silver. As the grades went on, my friends changed, so in later grades, Leticia Lopez was my friend, and Maria Andreu in fifth grade, and Tatiana Moreno in sixth grade, were more of my friends. So I didn't have the same friends, except for Summer Dowda was my **best** friend, and I went all the way through seventh grade with her.

**Ruiz:** Some of those names sound like Spanish names, so were some of those students in the Spanish group, or they were all in the English group?

**DeFarber:** I don't know. Maria Andreu lived in my neighborhood, and Leticia Lopez lived in my neighborhood. I'm not sure who was in my English class, because they had Spanish last names. Tatiana Moreno was only in sixth grade, and in sixth grade we were in the pod. And in the pod it was three classes in one giant room, and so by that time it

was impossible to know who was in an English group and who was in a Spanish group, because we were all physically in the same location.

**Ruiz:** I see. So when you spoke with these friends of yours, especially as you got older, do you remember the languages or the language that you used to speak with them?

**DeFarber:** I never spoke Spanish with any of my friends.

**Ruiz:** Okay. Well, we might come back to that. So let's talk a little bit about the program itself, the classroom. Do you remember what the ratio was of the use of Spanish and the use of English in the classrooms?

**DeFarber:** I remember that there was an American teacher, and everything that happened in her class was in English. And then there was lunch, and then when we were in the Spanish-speaking class, there was a Spanish-speaking teacher, and pretty much almost everything that we were doing was in Spanish in that class. And then when we had art, I don't really remember what language we used for visual arts, but for music we had—it was in both languages. We were learning all of the.... I'm not sure what they called them, the songs, for all of the military: the navy, the army, the marines. We were learning all of the songs for those military service groups in English. And "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "America the Beautiful." And then in Spanish, we would have a Spanish speaking teacher who would teach us all of the Spanish songs. Most of them, I believe were of Cuban origin, because my mother didn't know them. For instance, (Spanish, Min. 10:24) "*El ratoncito Miguel*" and (sings) "*El manicero, se va. El manicero, se va.*" "The Peanut Man." And I guess he was the peanut salesman. And then some other songs that were, I'm imagining, originally Cuban songs. And then if we were having a holiday, for instance like Christmas, then we would be learning songs in

English, like “Jingle Bells,” and then we were learning the same song, “*Cascabel, Cascabel.*” We were learning that in Spanish.

**Ruiz:** So it sounds as if your morning was in one language, and your afternoon was another, and it was divided that way generally in your experience. Is that what I’m hearing you say?

**DeFarber:** Yes.

**Ruiz:** Were some subjects always in one language or the other?

**DeFarber:** If they were being taught by an American teacher, whatever she taught us was in English. So if we were learning social studies, we were learning science, when we were in math, those were all in English. And then when we switched to the Spanish-speaking teacher, whatever she had on her agenda for that day—science or social studies—I believe they coordinated between the two, because I remember learning the countries and capitals in English, of all the countries in Europe and in South America; and then learning all the countries and capitals in Spanish in the Spanish-speaking class; learning the parts of the body in English, and then learning the parts of the body in Spanish.

**Ruiz:** I see. Okay. Good. Do you remember something about the curriculum materials, what languages those were in, the books or other materials that you might have had?

**DeFarber:** I remember books in English, but I don’t remember books in Spanish. I remember papers in Spanish, handouts that we were given, and work on the board was in Spanish, or overheads in Spanish. I remember that there were more materials in English than there were in Spanish.

**Ruiz:** And do you remember any of the names of the books?

**DeFarber:** No.

**Ruiz:** So these were all books for the different subjects, like math and science and so on, they were all different books?

**DeFarber:** Right. I can remember the “Jack and Jill” books or something, for English reading in first grade, but then after that I don’t really have any recollection of any specific books.

**Ruiz:** Can you describe more generally your day for us, as you were going through the program—the school day?

**DeFarber:** Getting to school in the morning. I can’t say positively I was always in the American class in the morning, but I’m thinking that we had our native language in the morning. And whatever homework or whatever we had to drill, or spelling, or vocabulary in English, and reading in English, and then lunchtime. And then we would switch. We would have our Spanish lessons. I remember the conjugating of verbs in Spanish. That was always a part of the lessons, to keep up on the vocabulary words as well as the science and the social studies. And then there was P.E. And we had P.E., I remember always pretty much having P.E. in the afternoon. But I’m sure that’s probably not the way it was, because I’m sure other grades—they had to distribute the grades, so P.E. was pretty much always outside. And we also had dancing as part of P.E.—folk dancing—and most of that was all in English. And the teacher in P.E. was American, and so pretty much everything she did was in English. Except I think I remember maybe she would use the Mexican hat dance, and we would do something to that. Because I remember (sings Mexican hat dance song), *Dah-dah, dah-dah, dah-dah: dah dah dah dah dah dah-dah. Dah-dah, dah-dah, dah-dah: dah dah dah dah dah dah-dah.*

**Ruiz:** When you say folk dancing, do you mean like square dancing or something like that?

**DeFarber:** Yeah, something like that. You know, (sings “Hokey Pokey” song) *You put your left foot in, you put your left foot out*, or other kinds of dancing that we did.

**Ruiz:** Was there ever any kind of Cuban music or dance that was included in that?

**DeFarber:** I don’t think so. I don’t remember any Cuban dancing. She might have used some Spanish music, but not....

**Ruiz:** Can you tell me how your parents were involved in school activities?

**DeFarber:** My father, because he was a stay-at-home dad, he had a relationship with pretty much all the teachers, because they knew if I got sick, that he was the one that would come and get me. He was the room mother for fifth grade in Mrs. Smith’s class. So for the American students in the English group, he was the room mother—because every room had a room mother. I asked him if he would volunteer to help that year, and he did. So he would help Mrs. Smith. And one time he brought an ice cream party, ice cream and soda party, for the students; and he helped with one of the carnivals that they were having. But other than that, I don’t think that they had really any relationship with the school.

**Ruiz:** Do you remember any other parents coming to the school, being involved in the school, or actually in your classroom activities?

**DeFarber:** No. We had teachers’ aides. I don’t remember parents being part of the school day.

**Ruiz:** Okay, and the teachers’ aides also were involved in instruction, or just helping the teacher with different tasks?—if you remember.

**DeFarber:** If we were going to see a film, maybe they would run the film, or they would watch the class. But I remember most of them being of Cuban descent. I believe that they were there to help the Spanish-speaking students, but they were available for all kinds of needs that the teachers would have.

**Ruiz:** I see. So they weren't involved in instruction as such. They were involved in basically helping with other kinds of things in the classroom.

**DeFarber:** Yes.

**Ruiz:** Okay, what do you remember about school-community kinds of relations/activities: things like perhaps open houses or informational meetings for the community, or some other kind of social get-togethers with the community, meetings with the community, anything like that?

**DeFarber:** I remember the PTA meetings were held in the cafeteria. And I don't know how often they were, but it was a real problem. We lived across the street, and there was always a parking problem on our street, because lots of people would try to park there, and that's where my father parked **his** car. I don't know if my parents went—I think they did. I think it was a zoo, there were way too many parents that would come to the school. I don't know that they were able to get anything done, but maybe announcements, etc.

Other things that the community did, there were two annual events: There was the Halloween carnival atmosphere, and I think people from the community were part of that. And then we had the May Fair celebration, with the May poles. I think during those events, the families could come to watch what was going on. And I think we had athletic events also, like the [three]-legged races, and some other competitions that you might see

at a field day showcase. We had those too, and I think parents were invited to come to that and watch that. But other than that, I'm really not aware of anything else.

**Ruiz:** Okay. I know you were a student then, but do you remember anything about interactions among the faculty, the staff, the administrators of the school, meetings that they would have, or any of that sort of thing?

**DeFarber:** Not really.

**Ruiz:** Do you remember any kind of technology that was used in the classrooms for teaching or anything else?

**DeFarber:** The overhead projectors and the filmstrips, and films. I think we saw "Hemo the Magnificent." I think we saw that in sixth grade. We'd have the filmstrips that had the clicking noise, so you would see one frame at a time. Those were pretty regular. And overhead projectors were used a lot.

**Ruiz:** Okay. Well, let me ask you now about some of the impressions or attitudes you have about your participation in the program. So if you can tell me generally how you felt at the time about your participation in the program.

**DeFarber:** Well, to me it was a mandatory thing that I had to go to school. I really did think about what else I might be doing if I didn't have to go to school, because to me I enjoyed being with all the kids, but they were so much more advanced than I was in English speaking and English reading—mostly in English reading out loud. I didn't have that kind of practice of reading, or reading to anyone. I'm sure I was read to, but it wasn't anything that was important to me. So I could see the difference between **my** ability, and everybody else's ability in reading. And that haunted me throughout my entire elementary school career. But when we were in Spanish class, I was **very**

comfortable—very comfortable with Spanish reading and writing, and I found it to be much easier. I actually really enjoyed the Spanish part of the day, because I felt **much** more relaxed in that environment, especially knowing that I **knew** so much Spanish, compared to my classmates.

**Ruiz:** I'm a little confused by a couple of responses. First you said that for the most part you spoke English with your friends, so you spoke a lot of English, essentially, and that was a language you were comfortable in. And now you're saying that one of your recollections of the school, your experience, is that you felt as if your proficiency in **reading** English was not very high, and that you felt anxious about it, or uncomfortable, or even more than that—maybe frustrated or whatever. Is that true?

**DeFarber:** Yes.

**Ruiz:** How do those things kind of jibe, how do they coincide?

**DeFarber:** Well, Spanish is my native language, and I understand 100% everything. And it was very easy for me to learn new words, and my retention was very good, and I didn't have to practice it. And reading phonetically in Spanish is a piece of cake, compared to reading phonetically in English. So I could always sound out the word, or I could always see what the word meant, and it was **very** quick. And I can't explain my proficiency in Spanish, other than to say it's my home language. My mother, 100% of her life, spoke to me in Spanish. So to me, it is my native language, even though I have spent 99% of my life speaking English. It's still my home language.

**Ruiz:** Okay, I understand that. The other thing that I'm trying to understand is why it is you wouldn't have searched out student friends who were also Spanish speakers, with whom you could speak Spanish as well.

**DeFarber:** Because they were always separated from our class unless we were having lunch, or in P.E., or in music. Very rarely were we combined. And I didn't really know them, and I didn't seek them out. But if they lived in my neighborhood, then I would know that, and I would come across them more often, so I would develop friendships with them that had nothing to do, really, with the school. They were my neighborhood friends. So nothing in my life was deliberate—it was all accidental. It was whatever was convenient, whatever was easy, whatever I didn't have to struggle with, that's what I would do.

**Ruiz:** Let me ask you something that's actually not on the list of questions, but it occurs to me that it might be an interesting question for you to think about. How do you think your experience and your ideas about your participation in the program would have been different if you had been assigned to the other group—not the English group, but the Spanish group. Would you still have had those same frustrations, but aimed at different things, or do you think you would have done better in the school, or felt better about the school?

**DeFarber:** I think I would have struggled a little bit in the Spanish class with my speaking, but not with my reading, my writing, or my comprehension. And I would have been an ace if I had started learning English reading techniques with the Spanish-speaking students. And then I would not have been embarrassed about my inability to read as quickly as the English-speaking students.

**Ruiz:** That's a very interesting idea. We'll have to think more about that. So you've told me about how you felt then. How do you feel now, about your having participated in that program?

**DeFarber:** I feel that it saved my Spanish-speaking life from being nonexistent, or being only existent with my mother. I can read and write it, and I understand it, and I'm just a more complete person than I would have been, had I just been in an American school. I also don't think I would have had as many good experiences. I had **more** good experiences, looking back on it now, having had the Spanish, because it saved me from being a really bad student, or a mediocre student. And it's just part of a culture, I think. I remember so many of the songs. I remember so much of what I learned. And it was very hard, it was **very** challenging to do this work in the school. And the rest of my schooling seemed so much easier than what I had to do [at Coral Way]. The homework, what I did the rest of my years, was so much easier than what I had to do, that I guess baptism by fire is sometimes really good, because when you look back on it, you can see the rest of life was a piece of cake, compared to what you had to do during this time that was very challenging. I was less anxious and more comfortable as life went on, having had this very difficult and challenging school life for the first six years.

**Ruiz:** You answered some of this question already, but maybe you want to expand on it. The question is, did the Coral Way program help you in your development as a student and as a person?

**DeFarber:** I would think so. All of the things I could have done wrong, or all my weaknesses came out very early in my life. And the rest of my life was much easier. So to some extent, I'm grateful for having gotten the very tough part of my life out of the way in the early parts—even though there were many, many painful days for me at that school.

**Ruiz:** And yet you said a little while ago that you feel as if some of your development would not have been there, had you gone to a straight for English school.

**DeFarber:** Correct. I would not be able to write e-mails in Spanish to my family in Argentina. I would not be able to go there, and without **any** problem, be with all of my family members. I find it very easy to talk to anyone, or to write what I need to write in Spanish, or read what I need to read. And I wouldn't have those skills. I can't say **absolutely** that I wouldn't have those skills, because I might have taken Spanish as a second language—and I did, in high school. It was a Spanish class, it was a piece of cake, it was one of those Mickey Mouse classes. And I could have taken Spanish in college, and it would have been a Mickey Mouse class for me. But I don't know that I would have it so ingrained in my being that it's something that's part of me that will never go away. And it can always get better, it can always be enhanced with practice.

**Ruiz:** Okay. Can you tell me who were some of the people who helped you most while you were in the program?

**DeFarber:** I don't really think I got a lot of help. I think that some of my classmates helped me. Summer Dowda, my best friend, helped me. My mother helped me on some of the Spanish-speaking projects. My father would take me to the library when we didn't have the encyclopedias that I needed to look up scientific organisms or geographical locations, and we were supposed to write a report on a specific geographical location. And so it was great to have his support after school, to take me right to the library, to be able to do that. I enjoyed the summer programs, the after-school programs. I don't know, help isn't really a great word. I didn't have a lot of help at Coral Way. I could have used a lot more help, especially in the reading part. It always seemed to me that the

teachers were overwhelmed, that what we didn't want to do was bother the teachers. And I had this sense of that, even being that young, that they had a lot on their plate. They had all these students who couldn't speak English, I was very aware of that. I don't know if other students were. And that was a big problem. In my home, my mother wasn't speaking English, and she was learning English from my father. So I knew, I was sensitive to this problem, because it was happening in my own home.

**Ruiz:** Have you ever talked with some of your teachers about this since then?

**DeFarber:** No.

**Ruiz:** That would be an interesting conversation. So, looking now at the total effect, or the larger effects on the program, how do you feel about how effective the program was in educating all the students?

**DeFarber:** I think it was extraordinarily effective, because many of the Spanish-speaking-group students, when we were combined in the sixth grade, were **hugely** successful at both languages. And I remember admiring them and being amazed at how proficient they were at both languages. It was hard to tell, other than their accent, that they started with any kind of deficiency in English. And that, to me, was remarkable. It was really brilliant the way that all the subjects were taught at the same time, pretty much, in both languages. And that's something I really remember clearly, because we really learned something, because we had to do it twice. And I bet if you ask other people who didn't have to do things twice, in two different languages, they just learned the material in one language, and then they went on to the next subject. So it was reinforced, and therefore I think I retained it because it was repeated. And especially because it was repeated in my native language. So I have an affinity for having done

things in both languages. Spelling out and writing out the words in both languages, and writing reports in both languages, those were all important skills. It slowed us down, because we couldn't cover so much material, but the material we covered, we really covered it.

**Ruiz:** What about those who went in as English speakers? Do you think they made the same kind of progress, both in terms of language proficiency and generally as students, as the Spanish-speakers did?

**DeFarber:** I think so, but I'm not sure. They had to perform in Spanish. They could not, not perform. I don't know how they did it, because I had the language, and I also had my mother—and my father, who also spoke Spanish. But that wasn't part of any conversation that I ever had with anyone, or I don't remember it. I remember being relaxed in Spanish classes, but I don't really know what other students were going through, the American students. If they struggled, I wasn't aware of that, it wasn't an overt struggle to me. But yes, they had to do equally as well. It's hard to say now how many of them retained anything, or what they retained, but I think you will be surprised that there are many of the English speakers who have retained quite a bit of the language.

**Ruiz:** Good. So maybe you can tell me again more generally how you feel about a model of schooling that uses two languages to teach children in school.

**DeFarber:** I would highly advocate for it, for lots and lots of different reasons: the basic one being that the material is repeated, and that the repetition helps students retain the material.

**Ruiz:** You said a minute ago that you considered Spanish to be your first language, but that you were also very proficient in English by the time you got to school. So this

question you might have to explain it back to me again, because the question is, Can you read and write in your second language now? So you'll have to tell me what you consider your second language.

**DeFarber:** I consider English to be my second language. And yes, I'm very good at that.

**Ruiz:** And you speak, read, and write in both languages?

**DeFarber:** Yes. My family in Argentina would say that my Spanish grammar is not what it should be, both in writing and speaking, and they are correct, because my mother passed away when I was twenty-eight and she was sixty-five, and in this country she was the person that I heard Spanish from the most, even though I never really spoke to her in Spanish. So yes, I'm proficient, I think—enough—in my first language and my second language.

**Ruiz:** Can I ask you about after-school activities? Did you attend any after-school experience? Did you know what after-school activities that students would have attended?

**DeFarber:** I think there were some remedial reading programs after school that I did in English. And then there was sometimes organized outdoor programs, P.E.—not P.E., but physical activities outside after school. Sometimes the cafeteria would be used as a place that would have after-school programs, and I would go to those. They were mostly games, and mostly activities that were not scholastic at all.

**Ruiz:** So you don't know of clubs, journalism kind of things, once you got a little bit older, or chess clubs, or any of those sorts of things that....

**DeFarber:** I don't think we had—in Coral Way—I don't think we had any clubs.

**Ruiz:** Okay. We'll ask other people to see what they remember about that, too. If you could tell me—and this will be my last question I'll ask you, if you have any questions after—what you enjoyed most and least about your experience in the program.

**DeFarber:** Oh, I enjoyed the music. I remember some recorder playing and some autoharp that I was able to participate in. I loved the singing, I loved the films when we ever had films. I loved having the teacher read us stories in either English or Spanish. I thoroughly enjoyed that aspect of the day, where we could relax and have someone who was so proficient, so beautifully read these stories to me, because my parents didn't have a lot of time to do that. I remember just being totally involved in these stories, and visualizing everything that was happening, because of the extraordinary reading proficiency of the teachers, that I always aspired to, but knew I would never achieve.

And what I liked the least was reading out loud in English, in front of all my classmates who were very, very proficient at reading. I can say that those were the extremes. Everything else was medium. I liked the dancing, too. I liked when we had dancing outside with Mrs. Schlotzky [phonetic], who was our P.E. teacher.

**Ruiz:** So you were required to read out loud?

**DeFarber:** Yes.

**Ruiz:** Was this every day, or just from time to time?

**DeFarber:** They wouldn't choose you every day to read, but you never knew what day they would choose you, the teacher would choose you, so I would try to hide behind the student in front of me, or try to pretend I was invisible, or have to use the restroom, or maybe get sick that day, or go to the clinic during reading—whatever I could do to avoid being noticed.

**Ruiz:** Did the program also require you to read out loud in Spanish?

**DeFarber:** Yes.

**Ruiz:** And that you enjoyed?

**DeFarber:** I didn't have the problems, because I could read at my pace, which was always slow. I'm always a slow reader. Even today, I believe I'm a slow reader. But all the other English-speaking students around me were very, very slow, much slower than I was.

**Ruiz:** Good. Is there anything else that we maybe didn't cover in our questions that you'd like to tell us about your experience at Coral Way?

**DeFarber:** Because it was across the street from my house, from my duplex on 19<sup>th</sup> Street, the cafeteria was immediately across the street, I felt that it was an extension of my home life, to have this school as part of my life. It was always there. So for six years I had this Coral Way building in front of my house. There wasn't any getting away from it. So I spent a lot of time there, even when we weren't in school—formally in school or formally in a summer program—I was at the school, playing basketball, or on the jungle gym, or doing exercises, or eating candy in the banyan tree that we would climb. So the school was a centerpiece of my entire life for six years. And I have very fond memories of the environment, how much space there was outside, the foliage, the trees, the art deco. Or it's not art deco, but the design of the school. In front of each of the water fountains there's a mosaic, and I remember those mosaics when we would go to the water fountain. So the design of the school, the porticos, the way the courtyard was so beautiful with the oak trees and the palm trees. This to me was half paradise and half hell, because it almost seemed such a wonderful place for me to be, kind of maybe too wonderful for someone

like me, and at the same time such a difficult and challenging place, but also a place that because of the Spanish, gave me a sense of being at home. So I can only say that it was a confusing period of my life: confused because some of it was difficult, and some of it was really easy, and some of it was really fun, and some of it was horrible. And I never knew what I was gonna get, or how I was going to feel when I went to school. And my friends changed, and it was just a very flux period of time. But I'm really grateful that my parents bought the duplex across the street. I don't think they had **any** idea that this was going to happen to them, or to us, to me and my brother.

**Ruiz:** Okay. Well thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]