

Coral Way Elementary School Bilingual Program
Orestes Gonzalez, March 26, 2008
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Interviewed by Richard Ruiz
Recorded by Richard Ruiz in New York City
For University of Arizona, Louise Greenfield
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Ruiz: This is an interview for the Coral Way Project. My name is Richard Ruiz. I'm with the University of Arizona, and we are in New York City. The date is March 26, 2008. The interview is with....

Gonzalez: My name is Orestes Gonzalez.

Ruiz: And you were at the Coral Way Project from what years, if you remember.

Gonzalez: From '62 through '68.

Ruiz: So you went through kind of the whole program as it was then.

Gonzalez: Yes, I did.

Ruiz: Do you remember much about how you were assigned to one group or another, and then first class?

Gonzalez: Well, I was either five and a half or six years old at that time, and they put me in with the Spanish speakers first. And after four or five weeks, or maybe it was less, they assigned me to the English-speaking group, because they saw that I had a natural ability to acquire the English language pretty quickly.

Ruiz: So it appears, if I can just interpret that a little bit, that maybe the default group was the English group. That is, if either by your name or by your appearance or by your parents or whatever, they thought you were a Spanish speaker, they put you in that one first.

Gonzalez: Yes.

Ruiz: But when they learned that you were fairly proficient at English, they switched you to the English group.

Gonzalez: Exactly. And also I seem to remember that I think I was there during kindergarten or before first grade. The program had not started, so I was in a group of kids that spoke English mostly. That's how I was able to absorb the basic knowledge of English that I had at that time.

Ruiz: But this was not a class in Coral Way, that was at another school?

Gonzalez: That was at another school. I don't remember which one it was.

Ruiz: Do you remember if you had friends in the other group? That is, you were in the English-speaking group eventually. Did you have friends who were in the Spanish-speaking group?

Gonzalez: Sure. Yes. Socially, I would probably congregate more with the Spanish or Cuban kids, but my classes were with the English-speaking kids. I do know, though, that in fifth or sixth grade, when I had Mrs. Sotolongo as a teacher, we all were in this very large classroom that was divided into pods. So we were learning within these groups, but really intermingling at recess and in the cafeteria with everybody else within the large classroom.

Ruiz: So when you say socially with the Cuban or Spanish-speakers, was that both in the school, at recess or whatever, and after school? Would that have been something that you'd do?

Gonzalez: After school we would socialize with my cousins and family member kids mostly. We wouldn't go on a play date to another Cuban kid that lived many miles away.

We would stay within the neighborhood, and most of my cousins lived in that area. So I grew up socially with my cousins.

Ruiz: Do you remember if you or your parents had any sense of the kind of historic significance of your going to Coral Way?

Gonzalez: None at all, no.

Ruiz: Did anybody think it kind of, if not special, at least a little unusual, that you were going to a school that used Spanish and English to instruct?

Gonzalez: I know my mother verbalized how happy she was that we were able to be in a class where Spanish was spoken also, but we didn't think it was unusual.

Ruiz: So there was a sense in which it was kind of routine?

Gonzalez: Yes.

Ruiz: And you don't remember, because you lived in the area, you didn't make any special effort to go there, it was just your neighborhood school, so it seemed somewhat natural?

Gonzalez: It was serendipitous. We happened to live a block away from the school.

Ruiz: With respect to the program itself, do you remember what the days were like as you went through the program? I know you said you started in first grade and you went all the way through. What were the grades like when you first started? What happened there?

Gonzalez: I remember that it was—thinking back on it and analyzing it, it was like looking at a black-and-white movie. It was very much a part of the times. We had large classes, classrooms with big windows with a lot of natural ventilation. They were impeccable. All the materials were strong and solid. The teachers were impeccably

dressed, and the kids all were combed and well fed. Looking at it now, as compared to the public schools that I've seen, it looked like a solid middle-class environment. You know, middle-class neighborhood. I don't know if I'm coloring [my memories] with nostalgia, but everybody seemed pretty happy, in spite of the fact of the trauma of having to leave Cuba and what was happening in Cuba at the time. The school environment was very happy and positive and very healthy. We didn't have a sense of "us" versus "them" I think. There was a pretty good sense of integration between the American kids and the Spanish kids. I do recall that there were **some** American-speaking parents that resented the program, and they either pulled the kids out.... Obviously the ones that were left were parents that accepted the program and thought it was positive.

One of the most striking memories I have of Coral Way was there were kids—I remember John Shankman, Jonathan Goober, Summer Dowda [phonetic spellings]—they all spoke Spanish flawlessly. They were Jewish-American kids, or just American kids who if they had not been there, they wouldn't speak with the facility that they were speaking in the sixth grade, which was great.

Ruiz: Do you remember the ratio of Spanish-to-English in your instruction?

Gonzalez: Well, the first years, I do remember that half of the class, in the morning it was one language, in the afternoon, after lunch, it was another language. Either the teacher would come into the classroom and teach, or we would go to another classroom where the teacher was always at that classroom. I don't quite remember now. But it was equal. It was one part before lunch, another part after lunch.

Ruiz: I'll come back to this in a minute, but going back to what I was asking before, what language or languages were spoken in your home at the time?

Gonzalez: Spanish.

Ruiz: Spanish only?

Gonzalez: Only Spanish.

Ruiz: Did that change at all as you went through the program?

Gonzalez: No. My parents thought that Spanish was the language of the house, and it was the language that we should continue to speak.

Ruiz: Did your language, the relationship between English, the ratio of English-to-Spanish, did that change in you, whether in your home or other places, do you remember?

Gonzalez: Well, I remember that my first language originally was Spanish, and over the years English became more of my first language. I think I realized how much English had taken over once I was at the university, where I couldn't write a paper in Spanish like they could in English. And that's when I first noticed that the balance had tipped towards English.

Ruiz: Have you noticed that that's still true, you are biliterate, you can read in both languages, but one is more dominant than the other?

Gonzalez: Oh sure. I also write a column for a magazine every month, and I write it in English first. It's a Spanish magazine, *Architecture and Design*. And I write it in English first, and then I sit down and handwrite it into Spanish, because it's harder for me to put it in a Spanish form.

Ruiz: But your fluency is still relatively balanced between English and Spanish? Would you say that?

Gonzalez: Well, it's funny, because I go to Miami and I speak Spanish, I love speaking Spanish, I love the language. But I get inhibited if I go to Latin America. I cannot hold a conversation with Latin Americans. It's not the same thing.

Ruiz: Okay, getting back to the classroom, do you remember reading and writing in both languages, or was it just one, or did that change over time?

Gonzalez: Reading and writing was probably more English. And I say that because I knew the rules for English much better, the rules for the language, much better than I do the ones for Spanish. I don't know if it was because I didn't want to do it in Spanish, or it wasn't taught that thoroughly, but I do remember that there was an emphasis more on English than on Spanish.

Ruiz: Do you remember the materials that were used for the classes—the textbooks, the handouts, anything that was written—were those both in English and Spanish? Were the textbooks in Spanish?

Gonzalez: We had some literature, some printed material, in Spanish, but a lot of it was English. I remember that most of the classes that were in English were more technically driven, like arithmetic and science. I think the classes in Spanish were more like the languages and literature or storytelling.

Ruiz: Do you remember if there were any extracurricular activities at the school—clubs or sports or anything like that—that you engaged in?

Gonzalez: No, I don't recall any extracurricular activities.

Ruiz: You talked before about this large classroom where there were three or four different groups. Did you enjoy that kind of aspect of it, the fact that there were 80, 90,

100 kids in one place, who were all kind of doing things separately, but also kind of together?

Gonzalez: I enjoyed it. I wasn't traumatized by it. I do know that I was very happy to be in my particular group, and I would have been totally traumatized if I had been chosen for a group that was kind of slower. I do remember there was a distinction between, "Oh, that group is the slower learners."

Ruiz: Really?

Gonzalez: Yes.

Ruiz: Hm.

Gonzalez: And I don't remember the facts, I'm just conveying the feeling that I had. "I don't want to be with that group. Those are like the dummies." We called them the dummies, or something like that.

Ruiz: Aside from **your** name for them, were they called something else, or were the different groups called something different?

Gonzalez: No, I don't think so.

Ruiz: So they were just designated by, say, the teacher: Mrs. Sotolongo's group, Miss Sanchez's group....

Gonzalez: Yes. And I remember feeling a sense of relief that I wasn't put into that third group. There was an elite group, mostly American kids, English-speaking kids. I was in the second group, kids that were totally balanced in English and Spanish. And then there was the third group. I remember they were mostly Spanish speakers, kids that had recently arrived from Cuba, or had not been fully integrated into what was going on in Coral Way at that moment, only because they were recent arrivals.

Ruiz: Do you remember anything about a group called Peter Pan?

Gonzalez: Yes.

Ruiz: Tell me something about that, whatever you remember.

Gonzalez: Well, Peter Pan was a group of kids that were sent to the United States by themselves, as I'm sure you're aware of. And they were placed in foster homes throughout the country, waiting for their parents to eventually arrive from Cuba. It all sounded great at the time, but the reality is, some of the kids never saw their parents after that, or saw them fifteen or twenty years later. That created a lot of resentment and a lot of mental anguish to those kids as they were growing up, and into adulthood, from what I hear.

Ruiz: Were there any Peter Pan kids that you know of at Coral Way?

Gonzalez: I don't believe so, no.

Ruiz: So you knew about Peter Pan just because in the community they were talking about these kids who came over?

Gonzalez: Yes.

Ruiz: And you may or may not have known some of them.

Gonzalez: Yes. There is one interesting detail that has nothing to do with Peter Pan. At that time, there was a lesbian couple that was raising a child in the sixties. And we kids knew that this kid had two mommies. The kid actually was adopted by one of the women, from Cuba, in Germany after World War II. She brought him over as her child, and these two women raised him after they left Cuba and lived in Miami. They lived two blocks away from Coral Way. So the concept of a two-mommy family or two-daddy

family, which is almost common now, especially here in New York, actually existed in Coral Way in 1968.

Ruiz: And the kid went to Coral Way?

Gonzalez: Yes.

Ruiz: You knew the student?

Gonzalez: Yes.

Ruiz: That's interesting. And it was accepted as just another kid, there was nothing special? People knew about it, but it wasn't a big deal.

Gonzalez: Yes. I mean, it was something that you saw, but nobody ever talked about it—at least not in front of me. Of course I was seven or eight years old, parents might have talked, but they wouldn't say anything in front of me.

Ruiz: Do you remember if your parents had any interaction at all with the school? Did they go to the school, did they talk to the teachers about you or about the program or whatever?

Gonzalez: Absolutely. Yes, my mother would participate in the parent-teacher meetings.

Ruiz: Were those meetings in Spanish, do you remember?

Gonzalez: Those meetings were with the Cuban teachers as well as American teachers, and my mother spoke Spanish, so they would talk in Spanish, I guess. There were no prohibitions as far as speaking Spanish in the school whatsoever.

Ruiz: What I meant was, if your parents, when they went to the school, used whatever English they had—or did they not speak English at all?

Gonzalez: They only spoke Spanish.

Ruiz: What about the administration? I guess most of them were English speakers, right—Mr. Logan and others?

Gonzalez: Mr. Logan was an English speaker, but all his administrative help there had to be a Spanish speaker—bilingual, obviously.

Ruiz: Do you remember any technology that was used for instructional purposes? I think you mentioned something about Sanchez's overhead project [unclear].

Gonzalez: Yes, they had overhead projectors. They would show films where they would hook up the spool and thread it through the [projector] and put it on the other side with the empty spool. They would have films like that. They would have the slide viewer/projectors. Nothing fancier than that. And regular, old-fashioned records. We'd play records sometimes. I remember it was either Mrs. Benitez or Mrs. DeVille [phonetic spellings] would play old Cuban records—not popular music like the mambo or the rumba, but things that were proper in Cuban society, like [unclear], stuff like that.

Ruiz: Interesting. When you left Coral Way after sixth grade, you went into junior high?

Gonzalez: I went to junior high.

Ruiz: Which one did you go to?

Gonzalez: I went to a Jesuit school, Belen Jesuit Prep.

Ruiz: Some of the students have told us that after they left Coral Way, they went to other public schools, junior highs.

Gonzalez: Probably Shenandoah.

Ruiz: Shenandoah. And actually, even after that, the high school. And in those schools, although they weren't completely bilingual schools, obviously, there were some classes

that were in Spanish, and that they decided that they, in fact, went into those classes intentionally. In other words, even after they left Coral Way, they were comfortable enough to go into some of those. Was anything like that available to you, and did you take advantage of any of that, do you remember, as you left and you went into junior high and high school?

Gonzalez: Well, I went into a private school, a Jesuit school, and Belen, I don't know if you know anything about Belen—it used to be a very large Jesuit school in Havana. When Castro closed down the school, the core faculty moved to Miami and opened up their own Belen here. Jesuit education is very strict, it's very academic and intense. My parents wanted me to go to this school because they had heard that.... They were afraid that going into junior high and high school, I'd turn into a hippie or something. So they wanted something a little bit more traditional, so they sent me to that school. Belen was comprised mostly of Spanish-speaking Spaniards or Cuban clerical administration people. And they spoke Spanish as the main language, but they also spoke English. And most of the classes were taught in English. But on an aside, they would speak in Spanish. So informally I'd still have that Spanish and English duality during the school day.

Ruiz: When you were at Coral Way, do you remember having more than one teacher assigned to your group—more than one adult, whether it was a teacher or an aide? Do you remember the aides and what they did?

Gonzalez: Yes. Mrs. Piñeiro was an aide during my tenure. Mrs. Brito was also an aide, Teresa Brito, during that time. I heard that after I left they became teachers. But they were aides at that time. So they were qualified aides, they weren't just housewives

with a lot of time on their hands. They were teachers probably back in Cuba, that were used as aides at that time.

Ruiz: Aside from the fact that you liked your group in the big classroom—and that was not at the beginning, I guess it was after second or third grade....

Gonzalez: They built that big addition on the south part of the school. That was the first big addition that they built.

Ruiz: Aside from the group that you were assigned to, that you liked, was there anything else distinctive about it that you either liked or didn't like? The fact that it was a large group, that maybe there was some noise from the other groups, or do you remember anything like that, that kind of stands out for you?

Gonzalez: I remember that everybody was in awe of being put into this large addition, this new big classroom, and I saw it as a big, ugly classroom. I wanted to be back in the main building which was so beautiful. I thought it was a negative. Everybody else thought it was a positive. It was completely windowless and air conditioned. I'm an architect, I've always had this design sense, so I felt very constricted in that building. That's the only negative I can think of.

Ruiz: Do you remember any outsiders coming into the classroom, just to observe, sitting there for a while and observing?

Gonzalez: No.

Ruiz: Because some of the teachers did tell us that some researchers sometimes would come and just sit there and watch and see how.... But apparently the kids weren't all that conscious of that. The last group of questions have to do with your impressions and ideas

about the approach that Coral Way took. Do you remember what you really enjoyed, and what you really didn't enjoy about your experience at Coral Way?

Gonzalez: Again, I'll say that nostalgia kind of clouds the things that you remember, and usually as a human being you tend to acknowledge the good things, versus the things that were not. So my impression was always very positive. I loved learning, so to me it was very easy for me to open a book and to read from a book in a classroom. I hated things like math and physics. But at the same time, there were other things that would interest me. So I think I was like a typical kid, you had your likes and dislikes. There was nothing as far as the administration or the way they were implementing things or doing things that I felt traumatized or affected by. I do know that we would always look forward to the art classes. One of the aides would come in, pushing her cart full of art supplies and equipment, and we'd spend a couple of hours. I don't know if it was once every two weeks or once a month, but that was something we would always look forward to. And there was very limited musical instruction at that time. I know that as I grew up and I met kids from elementary schools here on Long Island and Connecticut and the New York City Public Schools, they all learned how to play a musical instrument. They had the choice of going into the band, or.... And we didn't have that in South Florida, which I thought was a little tragic, because I think we could have taken advantage of that. A lot of kids would have been really good at that.

Ruiz: So it sounds to me as if you're saying that you, for the most part, at the time, you thought it was a fairly positive experience, you liked it and so on. That's looking back. That's trying to remember how you felt. How about now, looking back at it and thinking

that it was a good thing for your development as a student, as a human being, whatever.
How do you feel about the experience at Coral Way?

Gonzalez: I feel that.... What's really funny about Coral Way is you're almost, like wearing a bubble, in the sense that I was Cuban, and being Cuban I was surrounded by other Cubans, so I didn't feel like an outsider. That sense of being coddled and being in a place where you didn't feel different was very important. As I grew up, I noticed, especially going into university—because I started at the University of Miami, but I got a full scholarship to the University of Texas at Austin. Once I went to Austin, I felt like a second-class citizen. And only when I was in a dorm room, with a guy called José Chavez—I don't remember his [whole] name—but he had a full Hispanic name, he was of Mexican descent, he was from a little town called Seguin—that I felt that there was a distinction between the Hispanics and the rest of the population in Texas. I never felt like a second-class citizen in the Miami area. And that gives you so much confidence to just go out and do whatever the hell you want to do.

Ruiz: You felt like a second-class citizen in Texas because you felt as if, as a Spanish-speaker, or Latino, Hispanic, whatever....

Gonzalez: Let me tell you, my ego was so enormous that I didn't feel like a second-class citizen, but I knew there was a distinction. I didn't feel like I needed any extra help, or I needed to belong to a Hispanic group at U.T. in order to know who I was. Sometimes what happens when you join these groups, it's you versus them, or you versus the establishment, in order to succeed and get to the level that you want to be at. I felt like coming from a school like Coral Way, coming from an environment like Miami, where the group just moved forward without any conscious help from outside sources, that it

gives you an incredible amount of confidence that you can carry forward through the rest of your life.

Ruiz: Your sense of who you are as a person, and also as a professional person, you think maybe was affected by your initial experience at Coral Way—is that what you're saying?

Gonzalez: I think so. Because early on in those years, you establish certain things of who you are. Those things never change. Those things you continue to take with you throughout the years.

Ruiz: You're an architect now?

Gonzalez: Yes.

Ruiz: So you're not necessarily in the education field, but do you have any particular feelings about the approach of using two languages as a medium of instruction for kids, whether kids in general, or kids who have a particular language background or whatever? Do you have any feelings one way or another about that?

Gonzalez: I feel that English is the number one language. I think English needs to be taught first and foremost. But I do feel that kids that come from a certain background need to nourish and develop the culture where they came from—be it language or environment or whatever belongs to their culture. That gives you a bilingual person. That gives you somebody with two cultures, which I think is super-important in this country—because it brings you into the mainstream, but not only brings you into the mainstream, but it identifies you with a subgroup that'll just make you a better person, that will not make you ethnocentric, or biased in one way, which I think is really important, especially in the bicultural community that we live in today. There's so many

different groups of people. But at least with the main culture, which is English, the American culture, so to say, we all have that commonality where we can relate to each other. We could all comment on the same TV show, or the same article in the newspaper, be it you're from Bangladesh or you're from Ecuador.

Ruiz: You said earlier that you didn't have a sense of the historical significance of the school and your experience in it as you were going through it. Have you gotten any of that sense of historical significance since then? Do you have it now? Do you have an idea of how important Coral Way is in the history of education in the United States?

Gonzalez: Well, I always knew that the bilingual program at Coral Way was the first one ever done in the United States, so I knew that there was a sense of being pioneers, in a way. But I never dwelt too much on it, because I also saw how bilingual programs proliferated all around the United States. But I had no idea that Coral Way had put such an influence on the way things had been done in the school systems.

Ruiz: Yes, I can tell you that it is **the** most famous program in the history of the country, at least in terms of Spanish-English programs. It may not be the best known, and partly it's because a lot of people have taken for granted that the only thing you have to know about it is that it was the first. And so there's not been a lot of research on it. The students have not been followed up. And the teachers have not been interviewed, except now with this particular project. So that's why it's so important for us to be able to do this. Do you still keep in touch with any of the former Coral Way people, either teachers or students? Do you have any kind of interaction with them at all?

Gonzalez: No, I don't.

Ruiz: There have been no reunions or anything of that sort, that you know of?

Gonzalez: No, I haven't. I don't think there's **been** any reunions.

Ruiz: We—that is, Bess [DeFarber] and I—are trying to see if we can arrange one. It'd probably be in Miami and at Coral Way, for as many people as we can find to come down.

Gonzalez: That would be great.

Ruiz: We'll let everybody know about that. If you know of any other students—especially students—who are scattered wherever they are, we'd appreciate it if you'd let us know.

Gonzalez: I think it would be awesome for you to.... I don't know what your slant is, but I think it would be super-important to find the gringo kids, the ones that I remember speaking Spanish fluently when they were seven or eight years old—to see if they still use their Spanish, if it influenced the way they led their lives, or did it have an advantage in their careers at all.

Ruiz: We actually have found some of those, and we have talked with a few of them.

Gonzalez: Did they keep up with their Spanish?

Ruiz: Yes, and it's helped them in their careers. Cathy Poerschke, I don't know if you remember her....

Gonzalez: Yes!

Ruiz: We interviewed her in Miami. She's one who lives in Kendall. She now works for the Tobacco, Firearms, and whatever. She's in law enforcement.

Gonzalez: HEF.

Ruiz: Right. But in the kind of local I-don't-know-what-it-is, right there in Miami. She uses her Spanish all the time. People are very impressed. They think maybe she has a Latino background or something, because her accent is so good.

Gonzalez: That's what's so cool about these people, because you know how it is with Hispanics nowadays—you could be of any color. But in those days, being Hispanic, you were probably brown-skinned with brown eyes and dark hair. But you'd see these kids with light skin, freckles, and blue eyes, speaking Spanish like a Cuban, and saying *coño* all the time. And that's what made it so cool, I thought it was great. My mother **loved** it. My mother would have one of my playmates over, and she would **love** to listen to the kids speak Spanish. She was so proud of it.

Ruiz: Also, if you have any artifacts of any sort: pictures, some people still have their report cards, some people still have their scrapbooks that were fairly common at the time, anything of that sort that we might be able to use, we would scan it and send it back to you, or you can scan it and send it to us. These will be housed at the University of Arizona Library, but also at the South Florida Historical Museum. And that would be important, because as I said before, there's almost nothing—actually, literally, nothing on Coral Way at the museum. And they're very interested in having something.

Gonzalez: That's really amazing that that was never put together.

Ruiz: Thank you very much for the interview.

Gonzalez: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]