

Coral Way Elementary School Bilingual Program

Maria (“Tita”) Piñeiro, June 21, 2008

35 minutes

Interviewed by Bess DeFarber

recorded in Miami, Florida

For University of Arizona, Louise Greenfield

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DeFarber: This is Bess DeFarber. I’m with the University of Arizona Libraries, and I’m here interviewing for the Coral Way Oral History Project. We are here in Miami.

Can you state your name for the record?

Piñeiro: Yes, my name is Maria Piñeiro. They call me Tita Piñeiro.

DeFarber: Are you agreeing to do this interview for the oral history program?

Piñeiro: Of course.

DeFarber: Okay, thank you very much. Today is June 21, and it’s about 10:15 in the morning, and we are here in Maria’s home. So I wanted to ask you when you started at Coral Way Elementary, and how did you start?

Piñeiro: Okay, I started October 28, 1961. I came from Cuba in 1960. So I was working at the hotel, and I heard the news that they were looking for Spanish teachers to be like a bridge to help the English-speaking teachers, because we were receiving students from Cuba, children from Cuba. And we had two flights from Havana, and they were bringing here to Miami the kids. Then we started getting those kids. And because of that, then the bilingual program was ready to start.

DeFarber: Okay, and what was your role in the school?

Piñeiro: I was helping the orientation teacher. For the first two weeks, I didn’t know how much I was going to get paid, because they said “we really don’t know. Every day

we're receiving kids from Havana, and we don't know exactly how this program is going to be." So then they called the orientation program. That was between '61 and '64, then the bilingual program started because of the eagerness of our principal, Mr. Joseph Lee Logan. He was very pleased, he saw us. And then I remember one of the students was very sick—one of those Cuban students was very sick, and he said, "Miss Piñeiro, I'm going to write Castro to allow his daddy to come and visit. This child is going to be having a great big operation, a heart operation." And then he was insulted because Fidel Castro never answered. And he said, "How come?" And I said, "Well now you understand. You have to understand why we are here." Then he really understood us. Then that was the beginning of the program.

DeFarber: Wow. Can you tell me, when you started, what were you doing in the program?

Piñeiro: Anything they wanted me to do. I was helping the English-speaking teacher as a Cuban aide. They called us Cuban aides, eleven dollars per hour we started getting.

DeFarber: Per hour, or per day?

Piñeiro: Per day. I'm sorry, per day. Eighteen dollars per day. And then in two weeks they raised us for one dollar, and [we were] thrilled! But it was a great experience. Also, half of the day I was working in the office, at the counter, doing registration. And, you know, the secretary says, "You have to be very patient." And I said "Why?" She said, "Because now you are going to see what we are going through." Then I was registering the kids that were coming from Cuba, and then I said, "Okay, would you like to have your child in the bilingual class? We have all the classes in English the whole day, but we have one class that is called the bilingual program—half a day in Spanish and half a

day in English.” Then the parents immediately said, “No, I want my child to learn English. You see, I am a doctor, and I’m working in a factory.” [Another said], “I’m a lawyer, and I’m working in a factory.” Or “washing dishes.” So, “No, no, no, I just want my child....” Then we have to borrow students in order to have a full class, from another school, another neighboring school. That was Southside Elementary. So then it happened that within a year, the students, when we received the results for the SAT, the kids that were in the bilingual classes, they scored much better than the kids that were in the regular English program the whole day. So then here you have the surprise. Then we say.... You know since I was registering, then I said, “Mr. Logan, we have enough kids that now we don’t need to keep borrowing students from Southside.” And he said “No, those parents let us have them here, so we have to open another bilingual room in each grade level.”

DeFarber: Oh! so that’s how it expanded.

Piñeiro: That’s how it expanded. First we had first, second, and third grade. The second year was a success, and then we have two in first grade, two in second grade, two in third grade, and then we started one class in the fourth grade. And we did like that until the sixth grade, adding one class every year.

But let me tell you how the community accepted us. Okay, now I’m going to talk about our neighbors, our community. The parents, the Jewish community was the number one accepting us, because the family knew what they went through, and they say, “If a person speaks two languages, it’s going to be much better than a person that speaks only one language.” So that was then [unclear] immediately, you know. Then it was great! Then the program started getting visitors from every place, and it was really very

smooth. The principal got very close to us. I remember he invited us for dinner.

Mr. Bill was coming every Friday and he says, “Okay, do you think that this child can be ready to go in the mainstream, in a regular class?” That was **before** the bilingual. Then that was the way we started putting kids in the regular classroom. I’m talking now about before ’64. That was then.

DeFarber: So let me ask you about that just a moment. We wanted to know how students were assigned, whether they were supposed to be in the English-speaking group, or if they were assigned to be in the Spanish-speaking group. Is that what you’re talking about now?

Piñero: No, I’m telling you that before, the orientation program, I’m talking now about from 1961 to 1964. We have students that are coming from Cuba, so then as soon as they were able to say and to understand and to communicate, “May I go to the bathroom? May I have a drink? I don’t feel well. I have a headache,” then we send them to the regular classroom, because all the classes were getting full. The orientation classes were getting full with kids, because every day two flights from Havana were arriving, and that’s why. So we were able to.... Then it was the impact, you know, that Mr. Logan, being so close with us, Dr. Pauline Rojas. They tried to sell Mr. Logan the program. “Okay, this community, would you please allow us to start the program, the bilingual program here?” And Mr. Logan didn’t hesitate, he said yes. So then Eli de Perinaldo [phonetic] was the first bilingual Cuban aide. I was the second. Then Sanchez-Pando, then Teresa Brito, and then Elia Pico. The orientation teacher was Mrs. Juliet Woods, a lady that came from Michigan. She was a widow, and she came and she says, “I heard about this, the Cubans are coming and this, and I’d like to hear about this type of

program, the bilingual,” and then she applied to be a teacher. And Mirta Gonzales [phonetic] was a young, very energetic girl [whose] parents were Cuban, but Mirta was born, I believe, in Tampa. But Mirta was a secretary of Major King High [phonetic], Major from Miami at that time. Then that was.... I mean, it’s a long, long.... I can talk to you 24 hours!

DeFarber: It’s very interesting. Can you tell us, once it started, what was the ratio of Spanish and English in the classroom once the program began?

Piñero: When the program began, like half and half. Or, for example, we were very flexible, because if the parents, if one Spanish parent will come and say, “Oh, no, no, no,” because they have neighbors and they say, “My child is in the bilingual program.” Then immediately we have to accept it. So this is what I’m telling you that [unclear] in one year, because of the result of that, we didn’t need to borrow students from other. So then this is what we start, opening more classrooms, more bilingual classrooms.

DeFarber: Okay, so it was about half and half?

Piñero: Right, half and half.

DeFarber: Were some of the subjects always in one language or another?

Piñero: In both, in both, in both. For example, we made the plans: social studies, science, and health. Then, for example, if I didn’t have time, then if my teacher was teaching then, I have to reinforce with the writing, with the language. So we were very close. Every day we have.... (phone rings, recording paused)

DeFarber: Every day, what were you having, in terms of Spanish and English?

Piñero: Yes, every day they have the same [dozen?], the same amount of time for the same subjects. We have a very good intercom, with the English teacher. We were a

team. We used to work like a team. And every day we have to plan according to....

Then we were talking, okay, for example I would say, "You know, this child...." I mean, I didn't get it, you know, in that. And that was like a rain forest. But yes, everything was.... At the beginning, the problem was the books, that we didn't have the books. At the beginning we have to prepare more. Then later on we started getting books.

DeFarber: Do you remember when you were using books, or until what day you [unclear].

Piñeiro: Oh, I don't remember, but Maria Moleta Gonzalez Beta [phonetic] was the person that was.... She started bringing books from Spain, she was a regular teacher in a high school, and then because of that, then we started getting books. But for example, we get one book, and then we make up these, you know, for....

DeFarber: And before that, what were the curriculum materials? What were they, what did you do?

Piñeiro: No, we read the teacher's guide. I used to bring in the teacher's guide from the regular English teacher, and bring it home and then try to put it in Spanish, and make up our own lesson every day. But at the beginning it was very hard. But we were young, we were very energetic, and we have great support of the administration, and more so, poor Bill, he was always complimenting, "Oh, you're doing great!" And dosey.... Because Mr. Bill, his two girls, they speak Spanish.

DeFarber: His daughters?

Piñeiro: Two daughters, because he was married to, I believe it was a Guatemalan. His first wife was a Latin-American girl.

DeFarber: Oh, I didn't know that.

Piñeiro: Yes. And also, Ralph Robinette. He was a pioneer in the program. And Pauline Rojas, oh!

DeFarber: Okay. So anything else you want to share about what the day was like for you, what a typical day was like for you in the beginning, in that period from '63 to '68?

Piñeiro: A typical day was.... For example, when we were receiving compliments of parents that they understood that the child was able to communicate, and don't lose the Spanish. And helping parents that say, "I have to go to the grocery store, and then my child, he's the one that talks." So that thing, you were receiving a lot of compliments for parents. And then you saw the program flourishing.

DeFarber: Okay. Also, what do you remember about the school-community relations? Were there get-togethers with the parents?

Piñeiro: Yes.

DeFarber: Can you talk about how the community....

Piñeiro: The community was great. The secretary, Gertrude Swerner [phonetic], was a volunteer at the Baptist church around the corner. And then everybody started bringing clothes and shoes. "Okay, what size of shoes?" So then Mr. Logan on the loud speaker in the morning he says, "Okay, we need more shoes" or "we need more of this," and "that size is the most popular. Will you please...." So then everybody worked, putting the little thing in there for the bilingual. So then this is when the bilingual was really a success.

DeFarber: So the community....

Piñeiro: The community was open, and whenever we have parties. Some parents in other schools, you know they have air conditioning, and then they say, "Well, the

problem is that here, with the weather....” I say, “Well, the weather....” So in two years we start doing programs. We were a very close faculty. We started doing programs for the parents to come and see—spaghetti dinners. It was **huge**. In two years, we put air conditioning in **every** classroom. We started by the sixth-graders. That was like the third year of the program, when the program was more accepted. Then we were like a big family. We had a program, the faculty was on the stage, doing the program, acting like students. One was about Mickey Mouse, and the other one was about a day at Coral Way. So then we had a blackboard. The principal was the custodian, she was sweeping the floor. I was doing like a big child, I was throwing things. So we did something funny for the kids to come, and encouraged the parents. We had bake sales, we had *arroz con pollo*. You know everybody was cooking. And then we started changing the recipes. The community was very eager. Okay, and also, I don’t like to say that, but we lost many things in Cuba, and we just came here with hands empty, but we said with a degree in our pocket, that is the best thing that you can give a child. So then we were very happy that the program was a success.

DeFarber: Can you talk a little bit about.... Did you have a degree from Cuba?

Piñeiro: From Cuba.

DeFarber: What was your degree?

Piñeiro: *Pedagogia*. When I came here, I was afraid. My English was no good at all.

Today it’s no good at all, but **still** I can communicate better. But as you see, I was teaching Spanish as a second language. Okay. I’m also Spanish [unclear]. Then I started working, and then I decided to become a regular teacher in 1970. Let me tell you why. The other teachers, I never heard that person talk in English. She was always

talking to me in Spanish. And one day she called me in, she said, “Tita, I think that I called the hospital, my mother is at the hospital, and I called and they said ‘your mother passed away.’ And then I think that means they transferred her from one room to the other.” Then I said, “Oh my, if she passed, and she has a degree, I can study.” Then we went to the hospital, and the poor lady, instead of going from one room to the other, the lady died. So then I was so shocked and I said, “If this lady went to the university and she got the degree....” Then immediately, the following day, I wrote Tallahassee. Then I started studying to become a regular teacher. That was in 1970. Then in 1980, I got my master’s degree.

DeFarber: So until 1970 you were working as a Cuban aide in Coral Way?

Piñeiro: In Coral Way, [from] 1961 till 1970 I was a Cuban aide. Then they changed the title, and they said teacher’s aide.

DeFarber: Okay, I understand. What do you remember of the interactions among the administrators, the teachers, the students, and the parents?

Piñeiro: Great. Great. Of course we have to be very patient, because for example the Spanish parents were coming and saying.... Well, I’m going to give you one of the plays that we did, a copy of that. “Okay, listen, my daughter, you know, she has a headache. So in case she has a headache, please give an aspirin.” And you say, “We cannot give aspirin here.” And the people, they got mad. “You’re telling me that you cannot give?!” So then I said, “Well, it’s a rule that we have. You have to have permission, you have to bring a note, because we cannot.” And things like that, “Oh my God, no, no, no, no, no, I’m going to take my daughter home for lunch.” “No, lunch is going to be **here**.” “So long my daughter is going to be here?” It was a kind of new thing, but for the kids

immediately they were [unclear]. Parents were a little bit more. Then the community really helped: in the beauty salon, you know, because as Cubans, we go to the [beauty salon], the secretary. And Mr. Logan, he used to go to the barber shop. The father of one of the students was an employee, was a barber there. I said, “Oh, no, no, I want to go because I want to practice Spanish.” Then one day I remembered that I was subbing in order to have more money, and I started working at Miami High School. And a surprise, when I was sitting there, teaching, and I was a sub for the regular teacher. My secretary, Mrs. Werner, she was one of the students! And I couldn’t believe it. Then because she never told me that she was going to learn Spanish, because she always said, “I want to understand what you’re talking. Please don’t talk in Spanish, because I don’t understand.” So then it was a surprise. Then Josefina Sanchez-Pando was also the other teacher at Miami High. And then we started laughing and I say, “Please, no, you want then we start just understanding them better.” And Terecita Abrito’s mother was making dresses, you know for Mr. Logan’s wife. It was like a close family. We got very, very, very close. They invited us for dinner at Thanksgiving, because we didn’t celebrate Thanksgiving there. And then we invited them for *Noche Buena*, *Lechon Asado*. Okay? “So how do you cook this and that?” I remember then the following year I have my Thanksgiving at home, and I remember that I blamed *Gertrudes*, because I said, “Gertrude, you didn’t tell me that I have to pull the plastic from the inside!” And it was like rubber! “Oh, you ruined it, Tita! Come here! Come here and have lunch.” So then I went there, and she gave me half of her turkey! It was a big family.

DeFarber: Wow. How do you feel about the effectiveness of the program in educating **all** the students at that time?

Piñero: At that time parents were very involved. Also, the pupil—pressure. The Spanish kids knew that if they don't learn the language, English, they would end working like their parents. When they came here, they didn't know. And that was an incentive for both—for Spanish- and English-speaking students. In order to motivate them to study and have a better quality life than their parents had.

DeFarber: How do you feel about a model that uses two languages to teach children in school?

Piñero: The earlier, the better. The earlier, the better. One thing that I think that really helped was the songs. I remember I told you when I started the orientation program—I'm going back now to '61—then the Halloween songs, then the Thanksgiving song, (sings) “Over the river and through the woods....” Then holy days: Christmas, Hanukkah, all those songs, they were able to.... And they were not afraid to make mistakes. And we learned that if you make a mistake, never laugh [at] the other child. I mean, of course, we smiled and we joked, but it was really, it was great communication. That is very positive.

DeFarber: It's interesting, we've heard a lot from the students that they remember the songs in Spanish and in English.

Piñero: Yes, and also parents. The parents say they can start working as a third job with Terecita Brito. Then she went down talking about—I mean later—she went to work, she was the principal for a community school, and she hired me as a teacher for adults. And it was so interesting, because the kids were motivating the parents to come and learn the language. And it was very funny, because the homework that I used to put to my kids was to bring me on Monday, the Sunday paper, with advertising. Then, for

example, if one student, we say, “I am a carpenter,” [or] “I’m working at Winn Dixie, in the grocery store.” So then I was cutting pieces that said, “*Martillo*, hammer,” but with a picture. I didn’t have to put *martillo*, just had the word “hammer” and a picture of a *martillio*. Then the person that was working in the grocery store, they say, “Apple,” they have the picture of an apple. And that was great. Then they were exchanging envelopes, and they were so eager that Monday comes for me to give them that. And that was the homework for the people that.... . Spanish, didn’t receive their newspaper. And let me tell you, when we borrowed kids, and I mentioned doing that in ’64, kids from Southside, for the surprise of.... I had students from Guatemala and Colombia. They didn’t have many questions. “Oh well, study Spanish, okay, fine.” They were more.... But I think that because those families, they knew that they came here to the States to earn more money. **But**, they were free, and they were able to fly to their country anytime they want. So English was very important for them, of course. But [it was] the necessity for Cubans, because we knew that if we were coming here, we couldn’t be able to go back. So the only key for us to open the door for a better future was to learn the language, the sooner the better. I think that that was what was different. People from South America and people from Central America, they knew they were able to go back, soon or whenever they want. But Cubans? No. We have to stay here. So anyhow, we have to learn the language.

DeFarber: Did you think there was a possibility, or do you think that any of the families from Cuba thought there was a possibility they could go back, ever?

Piñeiro: At the beginning, of course. Everybody, at the beginning, we were thinking that we’re going to go back. But in the length.... But we were very positive, thinking

that we have to do this. Then if we go back, then but.... At the beginning we thought that we were going to go back. And look what year are we now, and we're still here.

DeFarber: Yes. So this is the last question: What did you enjoy most, and what was the least favorite of your experiences at Coral Way? What did you enjoy the most about being at Coral Way in the bilingual program, and what was the least attractive or beneficial experience that you had?

Piñero: Well, let me be honest with you. The least is that at the end of the day we were exhausted, because we had to plan and we had to make everything from scratch, because we didn't have the materials. That was the thing that was really a burden for us. And also, for example, if you have a bilingual class, you have two sets of parents. At open house, you didn't have time to talk to everybody. That was the thing that was like a minus, because of the hard work. Then this is what I think to become, being in a bilingual class you have to **love** the program. That's the thing. You have to say bilingual is great, and then try to apply, and maybe the headaches you have, I say, "Well, I really like, and this, I'm doing that because I like."

And the most is the reward. When you go, for example, to the hospital and you see, "Oh, you were the one that told me that my handwriting was very poor. And look, I'm a doctor." And I said, "Well, okay!" You know, the doctors they.... So then I remember, for example, being in a restaurant and looking for a child and [unclear] dressed like a policeman, and then.... Because I always used to say towards them, "What would you like to be when you run up [i.e., grow up]." Then to see the future, and to see that they really, because they became bilingual, being able to have a better job and succeed. That was really.... It was very hard, but we have a big price [i.e., reward].

DeFarber: Thank you so much for the interview today. Thank you so much, Maria.

Piñero: Well, it's a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]