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Helen Serrano

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The Story of Helen Serrano

STORYTELLER: Helen Serrano

FIVE OAKS

I was born July 19, 1951 in Brooklyn New York. My parents came from Puerto Rico. When they first arrived in this country, my father became the superintendent of the building we lived in. My mom was a stay at home mom for a while, and we lived with my two sisters. My parents weren't married, and they decided to separate when I was about 5 years old. From Brooklyn, I went to Manhattan with my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother was the first to come to America from Puerto Rico, and she worked as a live-in maid. My grandmother took care of us while my mom would go work in the factory. I would see my father regularly on visits, so I did have contact with him, which I thought was good.



Then from Manhattan, we moved to the south Bronx and I stayed there until I left New York permanently. **I WAS EDUCATED IN NYC PUBLIC SCHOOLS; I WAS THE FIRST ONE IN MY FAMILY TO GO TO COLLEGE, AND FROM THERE I WENT AND GOT MY MASTER'S DEGREE.** I decided to be a social worker. I didn't realize that I would love social work like I did, but I did for 38 years. I worked for a non-profit child-welfare agency that worked with families, and that's where my interest in community really started because I worked with a lot of intense, multi-problem families that dealt with things like alcoholism, poor-parenting, and more. I realized that things wouldn't necessarily be better if there weren't changes in those communities, so I got involved. After about 15 years, I went into medical social work and worked my last 10 years as a dialysis social worker. I learned a lot with those experiences. I had two daughters from two different marriages, but that wasn't a problem for us. It was important for me to give my daughters perspective on not only life, but how the world works. I would bring them on my house visits to show them the differences in people's lives, and how they should be thankful for their lives. I always taught them to understand difference between what they want and what they need. I didn't

want them growing up getting everything they wanted because I knew that isn't how the world works. I really wanted them to have as good of a life as I could give them.

When I was 63 I thought about leaving New York and moved to Dayton. My two daughters were grown and I felt that I could leave the big city. The thought to actually leave was never really in my mind, but I felt more and more resentful that despite the fact that I got a good education, I wasn't gaining anything in New York, and I didn't feel that was right. When my kids were young, I was more concerned and fearful that if I left New York that there would be problems with my daughters' dads, so the thought never crossed my mind. When I decided to leave, I was seeing a change in the New York that I knew, and I think a lot of people saw it too. I wanted something better for me and potentially for my daughters. In New York, everyone in the family depended on each other, whether that was for a place to live or just money to get by. There were often several generations living in the same home. As a result, I decided I should do it now, when I still have a part of my life left. My sister was living in Dayton, so the transition was easy and comfortable.

WHEN I LEFT, MY DAUGHTERS CAME TO VISIT ME A FEW TIMES AND THEY SAW HOW LIFE MOVED AT A DIFFERENT AND SLOWER PACE IN DAYTON THAN IN NEW YORK, AND THAT YOU COULD ATTAIN DIFFERENT THINGS HERE. When you are living in an apartment your whole life, you have no real say in anything and you're at the mercy of your landlord. That becomes tiresome and you feel like you're trapped. Here, with the recession, many people lost their jobs and there were a lot of foreclosed homes, and I was lucky enough to buy one for very cheap. I hadn't seen the house until I signed the papers. When I left the office and my sister brought me to the house, I thought to myself, "What did I do?" because there was a lot of work to be done on the house: half the ceiling was gone, mold was found in the walls, and the house needed plumbing, new electric, and many other things despite these setbacks. I saw all the potential in it. **ALL THE HOMES IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD, FIVE OAKS, HAVE THEIR OWN PERSONALITIES; THERE ARE NO COOKIE-CUTTER HOMES AND THAT GIVES THE COMMUNITIES A UNIQUE ATMOSPHERE.**

When I was settled into Dayton, I started doing volunteer work for the community. I really wanted to use my skills for the good of other people. I volunteered with the private animal

organization for about a year, and then I started working with my church more. I've noticed that people here are so nice in comparison to New York, even the people addicted to drugs. Dayton is such a giving community; if someone is in need, someone else will be there to help them. I have never seen anything like it.