

SAVING PRESERVATION STORIES:  
DIVERSITY AND THE OUTER BOROUGHES

The Reminiscences of  
Ivette Rivera and Desseree Soto

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Ivette Rivera and Desseree Soto conducted by Interviewer Leyla Vural on August 20, 2017. This interview is part of the *Saving Preservation Stories: Diversity and the Outer Boroughs* oral history project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

José “Chema” Soto, who died in 2015, cleared a vacant lot on the corner of Brook Avenue and 158th Street in the Melrose neighborhood of the South Bronx in the late 1970s and created what became, and remains, a community garden and important Puerto Rican cultural center, the Casita Rincón Criollo. Ivette Rivera and Desseree Soto, two of Chema’s daughters, grew up in the neighborhood and have lived there all of their lives. Seeing themselves as keepers of their father’s garden, the community center, and the vision behind both, they each spend at least part of every weekend at the Casita and maintain his tradition of organizing community events that center around music and food.

In this interview, Ivette and Desseree each share early memories of their South Bronx neighborhood and the Casita Rincón Criollo. Ivette recalls the neighborhood’s steady decline in the 1970s, when massive disinvestment and City neglect devastated the South Bronx, and she tells the story of how her father came to clear a trash-strewn lot in 1978 and build the first casita. Ivette and Desseree both describe how important the Casita was, and is, to them personally and to the community. During the neighborhood’s blighted years, they remember it as a safe and welcoming place. And they describe its important role in maintaining and nurturing Puerto Rican culture, particularly bomba and plena music. They describe key annual events and talk about efforts, on their own and in conjunction with Nos Quedamos and Place Matters, to preserve the Casita and the other remaining community gardens in the South Bronx.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesy

Session: 1

Interviewees: Ivette Rivera, Desseree Soto

Location: Bronx, New York

Interviewer: Leyla Vural

Date: August 20, 2017

Q: Again, it's Sunday, August 20, 2017. This is Leyla Vural, I am at the Casita Rincón Criollo in the Bronx with Desseree [Soto] and Ivette [Rivera] for the New York Preservation Archive Project's Saving Preservation Stories. So hello. Thank you.

Rivera: Hi.

Q: This time we're recording *[laughs]*. So Ivette, can you tell me where and when you were born and something about your early life?

Rivera: I was born in Puerto Rico—San Juan, Puerto Rico and I remember coming here when I was two years old. We moved here to the Bronx—my whole family was here, I remember. I guess, what I remember, it was the struggle that we were having in Puerto Rico back in the days, economic struggles and all that, and mommy came here for a better life, better opportunities for us. So that's basically what I remember.

Q: Did you come with your mom or did you come in stages?

Rivera: No, we came with my mother. At the time, it was me and my other three brothers and sisters. There's eight of us, I mean there was nine of us. When she came here, it was

four of us. So we all came together. My grandmother was already here. She was already living here, so were my aunts and uncles, were already here. Mom was the last one from her immediate family that came, last.

Q: What's your mom's name?

Rivera: Anfada Claro [*phonetic*].

Q: And did your dad come at the same time?

Rivera: Okay, Chema [Jose Soto] is not my biological father. He's my stepdad. I met him later on.

Q: Okay.

Rivera: Mommy met him here in New York.

Q: Okay. Do you remember those early years, what they were like?

Rivera: Growing up with my father or—

Q: Yes.

Rivera: Without my father?

Q: Whatever part you want to share.

Rivera: I remember when I was younger; we spent a lot of time with my grandmother and her sisters, my mother's sisters. They usually used to go and be more together, family-oriented. Now afterwards, I remember them moving away a little bit and being a little distant. I remember learning English because mommy only spoke Spanish but I remember learning English in school.

Q: Do you remember what I felt like when you started school?

Rivera: It was kind of different. I think I started school here; I never went to school in Puerto Rico. But yes, I remember being alone in a classroom. I was very quiet, shy. I remember that.

Q: Did you live in this neighborhood?

Rivera: Yes, all my life we lived in this neighborhood. We lived up in Courtlandt Avenue as far as back I can remember, back in the days when I was young. We lived in Courtlandt and grandma had a house. We all lived in the same block, my grandmother, my mother, my aunts. My uncle lived a couple of blocks down by Cypress [Avenue]. The family was here in the South Bronx.

Q: How do you remember the neighborhood?

Rivera: I remember the neighborhood because of the school and because we never moved actually away from here. We only relocated to certain areas. So I remember just always walking around the same block or to school, which is the first school I ever went to which was right up the block from here. I think they closed it. But I remember the name of the block, Cauldwell [Avenue].

Q: Do you remember what it looked like, what it felt like to be on this street?

Rivera: It was kind of different than Puerto Rico because in Puerto Rico, I think there was a lot of mud. It was kind of muddy. There were no sidewalks. Over here, we had sidewalks and it was different and we had trees and the trees looked different. And the cold weather, it was different.

Q: Do you remember—because those were the years when there were a lot of vacant lots and a lot of buildings were getting burned or vandalized—

Rivera: Not during the time when—the ‘60s—when I was younger. That happened later like in the ‘70s, later ‘70s. When we moved from where we were living and I remember living at Cauldwell when I was five or six years old, there was private houses all over the area. There were buildings and everything. There were a lot of buildings, I remember.

Later on slowly, the houses started—they were not doing maintenance on the houses. People were leaving to go—I don't know—to move out somewhere else. You started to see the vacant houses and stuff like that. That was a slow process. Once they tore them down, they were not being rebuilt. So I remember those things. When the '70s and the '80s came, it was vacant lots everywhere. It was a trend that kept on going until there was nothing around. So yes, I remember that.

Q: Do you want to tell me, Desseree, where and when you were born and how you remember your early childhood?

Soto: I was born here in the Bronx, 1980 and by that time, I was born into that era where everything was empty and dirty. Not too many people because everything was really vacant.

Q: Do you remember what that felt like?

Soto: I wouldn't say scary but that's the only word I can come up with. A little scary, like where is this going to lead to? What's going to happen next?

Q: So you must have been born after the first garden was started, right?

Soto: Yes.

Q: So I'm going to ask you, Ivette, about the beginning of—and help me pronounce it right—Casita Rincón Criollo?

Rivera: Yes. La Casita de Chema is the other name. That's how people call it but that was the original name, La Casita de Chema.

Q: Is what people usually say?

Rivera: Yes.

Q: Okay, is that how you always—

Rivera: The business name is El Rincón Criollo Centro Cultural. So yes—

Q: But people say—

Rivera: La Casita de Chema.

Q: Okay. Do you remember how it got started?

Rivera: Yes, actually we lived across the street and I remember we moved from Boston Road to where—my father was the super. They made him super at one of the buildings



around the corner where he had the social club, which was the social club across the street from the old casita. He was the super from the building that we moved into and they were actually building these projects over here, Bronxchester Houses. I remember we were going to move there. I remember mommy getting the applications and everything to move over there. They were trying to get everybody from all those buildings to move into the Bronxchester Houses because they wanted to vacate those buildings. One of the buildings where he had the social club in had to be vacated also.

I remember standing in front of the social club and he was with his friends looking across the street and they were talking and pointed to the vacant lot over there, saying they were going to clean it out. Because at the time, he had to move but if you looked around, there was nothing around. I mean it's not like he could rent another social club on another space. There was nothing to rent around.

So he decided that he was going to occupy that space there. So that's what they did. They cleaned up the space and I thought at the time they were going to make like a social club. I remember at that time, the park across the street, the City didn't take care of it. There was broken glass everywhere. The swings, it was abandoned almost. We used to hang out in the vacant lots and make little clubhouses too. We had to make our own space to play.

So I thought when he said he was going to make a club too, I was like, I know what he's going to do. We used to do those too. But he actually built a house *[laughs]*. I wasn't there at the time when he was building it because we had moved over here and we were

playing in the projects and stuff but I think we used to go and look inside the gates and there were a whole bunch of trees inside it.

I'd look and I peeked at them cleaning up these big chunks of, I don't know what, car pieces and big rocks. They were cleaning out the place. At the same time, they were building something. But I wouldn't go in. It was really uncomfortable to go into that area there. Mommy was like, "Stay over there. We're cleaning. You don't need to be here." We stood away from it but after awhile, they just cleaned up the whole thing. It was really incredible.

Q: So this was on the corner of 158th [Street] and Brook [Avenue], right?

Rivera: Yes.

Q: In what year?

Rivera: That was in '78, when we had moved out of there in '78, I think, or '79 and we moved over here to 156th [Street]. But they were still there, building that casita.

Q: Before that, your dad had—I didn't know about that—

Rivera: Social club?

Q: Social club. Can you tell me about that?

Rivera: The social club, he had it there for a long time. I don't know how long he had it because I remember my mother and he used to go there all the time but we were living somewhere else. I really learned about the social club when we moved to the block—when he had us move to the block because he was the superintendent of the building.

I used to go in—in the daytime, he used to—in the summertime, remember when they used to do the free lunches and everything? So he had the free lunches for the kids and we'd go in and get our lunch and everything. We'd go in and play inside the social club. In the morning time, there was nobody there. But it was a bar and he had a pool table and we'd go there in the morning and pick up our lunch and the afternoon. After three o'clock, he'd be like, "Okay, you guys got to stay out because my friends come in and they're going to be drinking." So we used to go to the park or play somewhere else.

But he had a lot of friends that were coming in to hang out with him. Also I remember an old friend of his, that was Marcial [*phonetic*], he came from Puerto Rico at the time and I was remember he was showing him how to make the panderos, or they were making them together, I'm not sure. Marcial actually got him involved in—getting into bringing that culture into his life. He hung around with that for a long time. So he also was part of—the way he became more traditionally involved in continuing the bomba and the plena in the casita. It attracted more people. Marcial also sang. He sang the music. It created more attention also when you have someone that sings the bomba and the plena.

Q: That was new in the Casita? That wasn't part of the social club?

Rivera: No, that wasn't part of the social club. That started during the time of the social club but it would never—they were not in groups. The groups, the pleneros and the bomberos, those groups started in the casita.

Q: Desseree, can you tell me how—what you remember of the casita when you were a little girl?

Soto: I remember taking plena classes with Benny Ayala. He's one of my father's oldest friends from over here in New York and I used to take bomba classes with Norma Cruz, who was also a member of the casita and one of his oldest friends, also. I remember that it was—and learned that bomba and plena were two separate types of music but at the casita, they somehow brought it together. My father, I remember he said his grandmother and his mother used to listen to bomba music and that was their thing but it wasn't too much of his thing. His thing was more of the plena. So he kind of just put them together. That's what I remember growing up in the casita.

Q: What do you remember of your dad? What was he like?

Soto: He was a joker. He was always making little stunts just to see your reaction so he could get a laugh out of you. He was very outgoing. I remember growing up, he was

always taking me to Harlem, to this place over here, you know they're playing over here. Fireworks was his thing for the fourth of July. I can't remember what street or block but I always remember us going somewhere where the streets was blocked off and they were putting off a lot of fireworks and we would just stand there and watch. So that was one of his things also.

Q: Do you remember him as a leader because he started the casita and people named it after him? Did you think of him as the leader of the casita?

Soto: Yes, he was. I don't think he planned it that way. He just wanted people to help him out. He didn't plan to become the public figure, how everyone sees him. That's not how he saw himself.

Q: So he didn't see himself as that?

Soto: No. If you would tell him, La Casita de Chema, he would say, "No, this is everybody's casita."

Q: But other people saw him as the—not just the one who started it, but the force who kept it going?

Soto: Right.

Q: So how did you learn about your family's culture and about Puerto Rican culture? Did all of that kind of happen here?

Soto: For me, yes. This is something I never saw anywhere else, not in school or anywhere else.

Q: How about you, Ivette?

Rivera: Yes, well, I think—my father had that in his heart. That was his pride. That's what he brought here to the casita. When you walk into the casita, you feel like—you have a lot of Puerto Ricans, a lot of plena and a lot of people talking Spanish. That was different from hanging out in front of the building, where I lived because everybody spoke English and everybody listened to English music. It was rap and this, hanging out with the right crowds and everything.

But over here, when you come from like a block away into the casita, it's different. This is Puerto Rico. You listen to bomba, you listen to plena, Spanish music. And everybody around is speaking Spanish. It was a different atmosphere as far as being in school or in front of the buildings or hanging out with my friends. This was where I learned how to speak more Spanish, where I was around the Puerto Ricans, our traditions, and I learned what was the bomba and the plena and I even learned how to play it *[laughs]*. And I love it.

When I go to Puerto Rico now, I understand—the difference, the passion that he had for Puerto Rico, that thing, the love of being Puerto Rican, that tradition, why they keep it still around and why the people don't want to let go of it. It brings people together. It goes back many years. I don't know. It's different music. I love it. I love to listen to it *[laughs]*.

Q: Did you also feel the casita was really important in a sense of personal and cultural pride?

Soto: Yes. Growing up I had many friends that kind of distanced themselves because they didn't know too much or they felt like, "Well, I don't speak Spanish, so I don't understand." But I had one or two that did come by and when he passed away, they always told me, "I always remember eating sunflower seeds and doing little things around the garden." So I'm glad to have them come and tell me now that they still remember those things.

Q: Were kids a big part of the community here when you were growing up?

Soto: Yes. I would say outside of the casita, a lot of it was negative. There was a lot going on in those years that I can remember, like kids being robbed. A lot of stuff going on. I was also robbed when I was younger. But in the casita, it was more of a family thing. You can come in and you don't have to worry about anything like that.

Q: Did you spend a lot of time here when you were kids?

Soto: Yes, I did.

Rivera: Yes, we did. But we were here mostly almost all the time. At the time, there was nowhere else to hang out. The park was not too good. So it was either the front of the building or in the casita. And we felt home here. We felt safe.

Q: And what kind of work did your dad do after he was the super in the building?

Rivera: He was working maintenance for New York City HPD [Housing Preservation and Development], I think, housing.

Q: That was his day job?

Rivera: Yes.

Q: What did your mom do?

Rivera: Mom never worked.

Soto: She stayed at home.



Rivera: She had too many kids *[laughter]*.

Soto: Yes, she did. I'm the youngest of nine. She was taking care of the nine kids, plus the grandkids that was coming in *[laughter]*.

Q: That's a lot of work.

Rivera: She helped out a lot here in the garden, cleaning it up, gardening when they started the apple trees, started cultivating the ground to make vegetables and all that stuff. She helped out a lot. She cleans up a lot around here and does a lot of work to maintain this place clean.

Q: Do you know how it got its name, its official name?

Rivera: That was, I think, dad. I don't know how he came up with it but I guess it was just that it was in the corner and then they went through certain names before, like three other names. But he came up with Rincón Criollo. I guess it's because it was in the corner. Rincón Criollo means space in the corner or something like that, place in the corner.

Q: Do you remember what the first names were?

Rivera: El Baté, I think it was.

Soto: La Gran Parada, I remember that one also.

Q: What does that mean?

Soto: The Grand Stop.

Q: Okay. But that didn't stick.

Rivera: No, they didn't like it too much, so they changed it. They kept Rincón Criollo.

Q: Baté is the open area outside of a casita, right?

Rivera: Yes.

Q: Maybe it's sort of a gathering spot?

Rivera: Yes.

Q: Okay. So can you tell me how you remember what the casita and building it and nurturing it meant for your father?

Rivera: When he retired—he was forced to retire because of his heart condition, he spent a lot of time here. He loved it. He never sat down. He was always standing up. He loved to work with his hands because he was an artist, “handicrafting” he said. He loved going around fixing things.

So this was like healthy for him, for his spirit, knowing that he has this space here where he can naturally work with his hands and build drums and meet people. What he missed in Puerto Rico, he brought here in his heart and he didn’t know he was doing that but eventually after years, that’s what people felt when they came here. That’s what he built and the love that he felt for the island, which was what he grew up doing.

Q: Do you know how old he was when he came to New York?

Soto: I think he was twenty-one. I believe he was twenty-one. From what I remember, it’s twenty-one.

Q: So can you describe for me a little bit more what the first casita looked like and how it got built? Was there a whole group of people?

Rivera: He built it according to how they build the casitas in Puerto Rico. That’s what he grew up doing over there. He was also a construction worker. So he knew how to build and he was really good with his hands. So he built it the way they build houses out there.

So that's what he brought here. He said he was going to make something simple and a simple thing in Puerto Rico is—to build a house for somebody—make something out of wood. So he started gathering wood from the vacant lots and everything like that, whatever he could get, and he built it with scraps from the neighborhood. And it came out like a casita.

After a year, he started reconstructing it and making it with good wood. I think he did it—the first one got burned down. The second one was a better one, because this wood was better. It wasn't scraps. It was actually donated by people that already loved the first casita. So it was a little bigger and he loved it, I'll tell you [*laughs*]. He loved it.

Soto: That was one of them.

Q: So I'm just going to say since the recording can't see this, Desseree is showing me a photo of maybe the first casita.

Soto: Not too sure, but that was one of them.

Q: One of the early ones. And they were always kind of a turquoise color, right?

Rivera: Yes.

Q: Do you remember the fire?

Rivera: No, I don't remember it. I think I remember it when I went, I saw it burnt down and they were actually taking it apart. But I didn't spend too much time there at the time, just trying to get mommy or try to get some change or money to get candy or whatever, and I'd just stop by and look for mom or dad and then just go back to the projects where we lived. But I remember them actually taking it apart and they were going to rebuild it.

Q: So there might have been two fires because I read there was one in '86. Do you remember that one, Desseree?

Soto: No.

Rivera: I think there was only one fire.

Soto: I don't remember but I do remember there was more than one.

Rivera: There was? I don't remember.

Soto: I remember mom saying that they had to rebuild it twice. The first one was out of scraps and they burnt that one. Then when they rebuilt it again, it was kind of a small one. That's why I believe that's one of them. And they burned that one also.

Q: They burned it; you mean somebody from the neighborhood burned it?

Soto: I don't think they knew who it was but at that time, burning was the thing.

Everything was burning down.

Q: I want to ask you, sort of about the life of the casita. There's sort of what I read about, the everyday life, like I see people playing cards and then the more formal organized events. Can you kind of describe maybe the everyday life of the casita first, and then tell me about the more formal things like Mother's Day? Do you want to tell me, Desseree?

Soto: I'm going to say every day—first thing we do is come in and clean whatever needs to be cleaned. We check on our gardens to see what needs to be picked, what grew, what didn't grow, pick out the weeds. The guys usually help out and after they're done, they'll sit down and play dominoes or cards or whatever and that's pretty much a typical day.

Q: When you were growing up, was that the typical day also, gardening and socializing?

Soto: Yes, it was. I remember growing up it was just a lot more people. A lot of his friends from the beginning of the start of the casita passed away. Over time, there was more and more passing away. So his crowd and circle kind of got a little bit smaller.

Q: Did a new generation of people come?

Soto: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about that, Ivette?

Rivera: So the new generation? Meaning—well, there were more pleneros that came from other neighborhoods, during the times when we had the events. They came here for the first time and they continued coming around more often. Dad had a lot of people coming from all over the city, coming to see this place. So he was always here.

Now he's not here, so he doesn't get the same crowd. Some of the time, we're not here. We work or we're busy doing other things but we try to keep the traditions that he started. So we keep the Mother's Day, the Father's Day and we're here on the weekends, have this open for the public, for whoever wants to come in. We still have people that still come in and want to pick the fruit or the peaches.

Q: Can you tell me about the events like Mother's Day and Father's Day? What happens then?

Rivera: On Mother's Day, which is one of the first festivals of the year, we have the pig roasting and we have the pleneros, we have music, the pleneros. We also have people volunteer, bringing food or special Puerto Rican dishes that they make. We have a party, actually. We celebrate the plena and the bomba and we just party all day.

Q: Is that a big event?

Rivera: It's actually every year that we do it. Yes, most likely, yes, it's a big event for us and the neighborhood and the community, because they know we always—that's what we do every Mother's Day is for the mothers.

Q: How many people would you say used to come when you were growing up?

Rivera: Well, when dad was around, we had a lot of people here. Some years more than others. Recently, like these past few years, the crowd's been diminishing. This year, we had more people than last year. But we're still going to continue doing what he wanted us to do because people think that because he's not around anymore that things are not the same. But I always tell everybody, "This is what he wanted. He wanted this place not to die out."

We're going to continue doing what he promised the people or what he promised us to do, which was not let it fall, to continue the traditions of Puerto Rico and the traditions that he started here back in the days when there was nothing around. The reason why he started doing that back in the days is because we were the only hangout for the community at the time. People admired the salsa and the bomba that was there and he said, well, let's start celebrating—make a celebration so people could actually have a reason to come and a reason to sit around and enjoy the activities or festivities of the bomba and the plena along with celebrating a holiday at the same time.



So that's how Mother's Day came around and Father's Day. He chose those holidays as a way to bring people to enjoy the music. We continue to do that today.

Q: Do you remember, Desseree, how it was that this became such an important place for bomba and plena? I know all kinds of famous people have come and groups have gotten started here that have become famous. Do you know how that came to be?

Soto: Well, it was the only place, not just in the Bronx but in New York where you could find that type of music that comes from the island. You couldn't find that anywhere else, only if you were in Puerto Rico. So it wasn't just in the Bronx. It was all over. And I remember for New Years, he used to do a moula [*phonetic*] which was—he would start at Harlem and they would walk their way up here, playing bomba and plena, stopping at every building or store or park or whatever they would come across, walking from over there to over here and this was the last stop.

Rivera: In the cold—it was cold weather [*laughter*].

Rivera: They collect change too. People donate—he used those funds, donations for the casita at the time.

Q: That's a nice memory. I wanted to ask you, what happens to the casita in the winter? So actually New Years is the perfect segue. What else goes on during the winter? Does the Casita stay open? Do people still come or is it really a warm weather place?

Soto: No, it don't stay open as much as during the summer months, but in December—I had a conversation with one of the pleneros, the younger generation, more my age group. He started out—actually when my father was still living—he started out doing the paranda, he calls it. It wasn't the moula, his was the paranda but pretty much similar to the moula, going around, playing the bomba and plena. I remember the first year, there was only about five of them. So he kept doing it every year, every year and now it's getting bigger and bigger.

So he spoke to me and, of course, some other people, organizations who came to the table and said, “We want to make this bigger. We want to keep doing it every year.” So now we're starting to do it every year in December, usually a couple days before Christmas.

Q: That's great. That's great.

Rivera: Yes, usually they have to map it out because it's the twelve casitas, twelve gardens. So they go from one garden to another. And then we're the last stop here. So when they stop here, we put lights on because by the time they get here, it's like seven o'clock at night. So last year we had a big pot of soup because it was really cold. It was December twenty-first or something like that. We had soup and hot chocolate, a cup of coquito, drinks, like they do in Puerto Rico. They played plena for a little while, the news be here and then they went to the tree-lighting over on 161st Street. So it's happening. It's pretty good.

Q: It sounds beautiful. I read that—I heard it described as how many members the casita has. Are you a membership—do people actually formally become members or how does it work here?

Soto: Well, everyone—

Rivera: The gardens have—we rent the space actually for them.

Soto: That's what we write down as members but pretty much everyone who comes here, the pleneros, they call themselves a member.

Q: They're not paying dues or voting—

Soto: No, no.

Rivera: No, we have our own board members because we're actually incorporated. So we have our own board members that help here. But we also have members that rent a space for the garden. We use those funds also for maintaining, buying fertilizer, buying stuff that we need for the garden or the bathroom and stuff. The port-a-potty, we have to pay for it *[laughs]*.

Q: So I wanted to ask you, I know you've gotten recognition over the years, like in 1990, a New York Times article described this as "the city's unofficial center for traditional percussive Puerto Rican music." So obviously the La Casita de Chema was known all around the city and we talked about this before the recording went on, the Smithsonian [Institution] had an exhibit, I think in '91 with the Bronx Museum [of the Arts] and [Eugenio María de] Hostos Community College in 2010, did kind of a twentieth anniversary. I think El Museo del Barrio did something.

So did your dad help to make that happen and what did he think about getting that kind of outside the community recognition?

Rivera: He loved it. He loved the attention. He liked to build things, like I said. He was good with his hands. When his friends knew about it, they were challenged to want to help him out. They were excited about it. They wanted to be part of it. They were just, "Okay, let's do this and that." They all worked together as a group and did whatever they had to do to get that done. Anything that had to do with building something, he was there. He was in for it.

Q: You said that he built a model.

Rivera: He built several models. He built a model in Hostos. They built a model that went to the Smithsonian and one that they did in the Bronx Museum, he built that too. I

remember the one for the Bronx Museum, it was a smaller one. It was a model like this house. I think it was this house or the old one. I don't remember, not quite sure.

Q: So maybe like two or three feet wide.

Rivera: Yes.

Q: The other ones were bigger than that?

Rivera: The one in Hostos, yes, because that's the one that was on stilts. That one was beautiful. It was awesome, I was like, aw *[laughter]*. You have to see it. I wanted to go inside but I was too big.

Q: Like it was big enough for a kid?

Rivera: Yes, it was like a clubhouse, like a treehouse actually, that size.

Q: Cool, cool. So I wanted to ask you, the neighborhood's obviously changed a lot from how you remember it when you were little, both from how you remember it, Ivette, from before it was so much sort of disinvestment and then how it was from when you were a little girl and now there's so much new construction. Can you tell me about how the neighborhood has changed and how La Casita de Chema kind of fits in with the neighborhood over time?

Soto: That was one of the reasons why they came to this location was because of the change, because of the—developers were coming in and looking at certain properties. Being that he didn't own that piece of land, he fought as long as he could but at some point he had to give up and, as you can see, there's a beautiful building there now. But that's why we had this second location due to the change and everything.

Q: I wanted to ask about that. So the original corner was 158th and Brook, which was an abandoned lot, and at some point, the City said, "Out you go, we're going to sell it to a developer." I guess?

Rivera: Yes.

Q: Is that what happened? And do you remember how your dad and the community fought to save the space?

Rivera: I don't remember. I wasn't part of it but I heard they went to city hall and they petitioned and they collected signatures. They fought to keep it with GreenThumb actually. Operation GreenThumb helped them a lot to try to save and make this an important place. Saying, we have a space here that's safe, that's worth saving and also it has more than just a garden. It has a cultural tradition for the Puerto Ricans. It's a space for them.

Yes, I think that's what happened during that time. We actually had—it wasn't just us. It was also the other gardeners that—the other casitas or the other gardeners around the neighborhood that also participated in trying to save us because if we weren't saved—and we were the oldest ones—that means that they were going to be closed out too. So they fought with us too and then eventually they tried to keep their space. Because we were able to save this space, they were also safe at the same time too. GreenThumb—that made them stronger and learn more about if you have a garden, this is what you have to do to try to keep it safe so the City won't take it from you.

Q: So they made you leave the corner of 158th and now you're at 157th. How safe do you feel this space is now?

Rivera: Well, they actually gave us this space. They gave us funds to move from over there, relocate us here. They made this more of a—not permanent but a safer place. That meant a lot to us and we felt safer here now than we did over there.

Q: But you don't own the land, do you?

Rivera: No. This is part of—

Soto: They actually told me it was a permanent space but me knowing times and as many times as I've seen this area change, I still keep my guard up. I'm never going to let my guard down because you never know.

Q: Because there really aren't any more vacant lots around here, are there?

Rivera: No. I think there's one over here that's being built right now.

Soto: Yes, they're building something.

Rivera: They're building something on that one. That's one of the oldest ones in the neighborhood. It is like a triangle one. I think we're one of the pieces here as far as the projects [*unclear*]. It's one of the oldest spots in the neighborhood. We've been here a long time, before all these buildings came.

Q: Yes. So I wanted to ask you, Desseree, do you live nearby also?

Soto: Yes.

Q: So you both really chose to stay in the neighborhood, right?

Rivera: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about that? What made you choose to stay?



Rivera: I stayed in the neighborhood because of the garden, of the casita, because I feel if I move too far, then I won't be able to be here, like for your interview *[laughs]* or if there's people who want to come in and enjoy the space here. I feel like this is a second job to me and I have to be nearby. Like my job, I'm right next to my job too. I don't live too far from my job. It's all where I grew up at. I've been here all my life, mostly, and I don't think I want to leave this place. The city's changing and everything but I'm trying to stay here. We're trying to stay here. I'll make sure that if I'm needed here, I'm here and I can just take a little bus trip over here or walk here. It makes it easier, more comfortable to be around here.

Q: How about you, Desseree, what made you stay?

Soto: My parents. There have been times where I said—I have a lot of my friends who moved out and I said, “Okay, that looks pretty good.” They tell me how good it is over there and over here, but I wasn't going anywhere without my parents. They're not leaving if this casita's here, so here I'm going to stay.

Q: Do you feel like the changes in the neighborhood are pushing people who grew up in the neighborhood out?

Rivera: Yes, definitely. We have to stay with the force that's trying to keep us here. We—getting involved in the community and knowing what's going on in the community. We meet with Nos Quedamos and learn and go to meetings with other organizations in

the neighborhood. We know what's going on but at the same time, we have to also make sure that we find every means to stay here.

We're also trying to help the other casitas unite with us to an organization that my father tried to start. Desseree's following up with that. It's called Huerto y Cultura, which is the Coalition of the Twelve Casitas. She's working on that with Nos Quedamos as partners with them.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

Soto: Yes, that was something my father created when they took the other casita from him. He wanted all of the gardeners and everyone who was taking care of—not just the casita, it could just be a garden space or anything, to stick together. If any day comes where any of them was being threatened for development, that they would come together and fight together to keep their space.

Q: And what's the name of the organization?

Soto: Huerto y Cultura

Q: Puerto Rico Cultura?

Rivera: Huerta.

Q: Huerta, what does that mean?

Rivera: It means garden, right, garden space?

Q: Okay. So garden and culture—

Rivera: Yes. Garden and culture.

Q: Huerto y Cultura, okay. And do you work with the remaining gardens and Nos Quedamos together?

Soto: Yes.

Q: And do you meet regularly?

Soto: Yes, once a month we meet.

Q: Do you find that a meaningful way of trying to protect the casita?

Soto: Yes, especially with Nos Quedamos because they also are partners with the city, finding good locations for development. So they also are protecting us, just in case any

developers do have an eye or say, “Well, what about this?” They are there to say, “You know what? No, we’re not touching this space.”

Q: Because I read they were helpful in 2006 like you mentioned and I know Nos Quedamos means, we stayed, like we’re the people who didn’t get scared away or burnt out, insisted on maintaining ourselves. So that’s its own history, right?

Soto: Yes.

Q: So I also read though a lot of community gardens haven’t survived. There are far fewer than there were—I don’t know, a third left or something like that.

Soto: Yes.

Q: Were you involved in trying to help save those?

Soto: Not me personally. At the time, I don’t even think that my father knew it was happening. I think at the time it was happening to him, that was more of an eye-opener because that was the first one and it was pretty much a big deal. The casita, a lot of people say is a famous landmark and everything else. So that was more of an eye-opener to what was going on.

Q: That's interesting. I read that in 2009, Adolfo Carrión [Jr.] announced that he was going to try to get the Casita recognized as a landmark in the city, which I know that didn't end up happening but do you remember that? Was that something that was important to your dad?

Soto: I heard about it and I didn't think it was important to him at first but he figured, okay, if we do this, then it would save—anything to save the casita and keep it there, he was all for it.

Q: Then I also read that—and I think your dad was involved with this and I'm wondering if you are now—that PlaceMatters, do you know that organization?

Soto: Yes.

Q: That they together with, I think, Western Kentucky University and the American Folklore Society are trying to get the casita put on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Soto: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about that? What do you think about that?

Soto: Actually Molly from there, yes, she's still working on it. She asks me for everything I need. I tell her all the casitas he's built, I try to connect her with the person who's caring for them now, because it was different people before. She actually has gotten a lot of information, has gotten in contact with a lot of the gardens in the area.

Q: And do you think that being on the Historic Registry would be an important thing for you?

Soto: Yes, yes.

Q: I know that doesn't guarantee a space. So in what way—how do you think it would be helpful?

Soto: This is history. So why not—I think it should be acknowledged as a place of history, a place that holds a lot of history, a lot of histories that come from Puerto Rico that you wouldn't see in New York ever if he wouldn't have done this.

Q: What do you think, Ivette?

Rivera: I think it's important to save the Puerto Rican tradition of community that he put together here, which is the Puerto Ricans, that they come together here in this important place, where they practice their traditions, the cultural music which is the bomba and the plena and that the Puerto Ricans have a space in the Bronx that he tried to maintain for so

many years, to make it a home and a space for them to practice or to play their folklore music.

So yes, it's very important to the community and to the Puerto Ricans in the city because I think there's a lot of them that know this place exists here. They come around on Mother's Day, Father's Day because they know that we're here. It's already a custom or a practice. They know that yes, they're going to be here and we are here. They know they can come here.

Q: Well, it's really interesting because this is a place that preserves Puerto Rican culture and now you're also fighting to preserve the place that preserves the culture. It's kind of these layers. So what do you see or what do you hope is the future of the casita?

Soto: Fight to continue, to get bigger—

Rivera: To get more recognized, to know that we're here to stay and to always for the old-timers, that they know that we're still here but for the new-timers that are coming out, they learn that this is a cultural place. We have history and practicing or preserving the Puerto Rican culture and music, that we have plenero celebrations, our Mother's Day celebrations, Father's Day celebration and we also have a lot of new events for the community which is we do Halloween where we give away, the Back to School that we started this year, the book bags for the kids.

We want to keep having—they come in and we want to let them know that what we have here is our heritage, our Puerto Rican heritage. They can learn here how to be or learn the music or listen to the music, which is important because they don't listen to this music on the radio. It's not on the radio, it's not on the block. Nobody's playing it. It's here, in this space here.

Q: Can you tell me about the festival that you have with Hostos, the BomPlenazo? Can you tell me about that?

Soto: The BomPlenazo was created—its one thing I learned, that I didn't know, what was the reasons for it. In Puerto Rico, a lot of the musical artists do not come together and play together. They have kind of an ego type of thing, if he plays I'm not going to play. That's something I learned years down the road and even until now, I still hear some people say that to me. The BomPlenazo was something my father wanted to create to have every plenero, every artist, every musician to come from everywhere, whether it's Chicago, Florida, Puerto Rico, anywhere to come together and play together.

Q: And so what does that look like? What is the event?

Soto: It's just like a whole bunch of pleneros—when you have a BomPlenazo here, you're not a part of this group or a part of that group; you're just all musicians playing together, just going with the flow.



Rivera: And one sings and the other one stops singing, and that one's tired and someone else picks the mic up. So we have like five or six mic there. When the one finishes singing and the other one starts singing their song, it's fun. You feel it in the air. The drums, it just captivates you, the music. It's awesome.

Q: So it's like a Puerto Rican improvisation.

Rivera: Yes.

Q: Is the event—you were mentioning, Ivette, before we started recording that musicians go from casita to casita.

Rivera: That's the paranda. That's in December, yes.

Q: Okay. The BomPlenazo is only here.

Rivera: The BomPlenazo is a biennial that we do every two years and that's a week event. Hostos has an event over there where they have the pleneros from Puerto Rico and from California come over there and perform. They perform on different dates. At the end of the week, they do it here. They all come together here as a group.

Q: So does that feel like you created a new tradition, like something out of the old but bringing it together in a new way, would you say?

Soto: He did, yes, I believe he did.

Rivera: I think next year is going to be the tenth biennial. So I guess it's like twenty years that it's been around. That started—Tito Matos from Puerto Rico started with the connections with Hostos Community College, bringing the BomPlenazo together as a celebration they do every two years. They help us out here with donations to the music and this is awesome. We try to make sure that they don't stop celebrating the heritage of the music also, the culture.

Q: So what concerns do you have about the future of the Casita?

Rivera: I don't have any concerns. I think we're going to be here for a while. We're more involved in the community. We have more people around and we also have more different events than Dad had. So we're trying to make more things happen here for the community. Not only bomba and plena but other things to get other people involved. I know we're diversified around the neighborhood so we can do other things also.

Q: What do you think, Desseree, do you have any concerns?

Soto: Right now, no, no concerns at all.

Q: Is there still a big Puerto Rican community in Melrose?

Soto: Yes.

Rivera: Yes, there is. They come together. They know where we're at [*laughs*]. They're still around.

Q: And do you still have a tie to Puerto Rico itself? Do you go back?

Rivera: Yes, we go back there. We were there two weeks ago—

Soto: In July.

Rivera: In July, three weeks ago, four weeks ago. We participated in—we showed a documentary of our father over there in Ponce, one of the cultural centers over there and also in—

Soto: La Junta.

Rivera: La Junta, it's a club that Tito Matos has, the one that started the BomPlenazo, and he does bomba and plena over there on the weekends at his club. It's a really nice place. He had an event there for us too. When we go there, we know some of the pleneros that come here to the biennial BomPlenazo that we have here, so we get to meet artists from

the other cities. When we go to Puerto Rico, we know who they are and that's how we connect. We go and visit them or we go to their places.

Q: So who went to Puerto Rico in July?

Soto: It was me and her, my mother, my brother, his daughter, my nephew, which is her son, both of her sons, my oldest, my youngest. Last year, all three of my girls went. There's always a group of us and we go every year. There's always a group of us—

Rivera: Two people from the community come here, they go with us too. Also Bronxnet—what is his title, Felipe [Garcia]? He's from Bronxnet.

Soto: He's the producer of the film.

Rivera: Yes, he came also too. He hung out with us for a little while too. When we were over there, we bumped into a whole bunch of the pleneros from here that went over there to visit. So it was awesome. So we also know Tato Torres. We actually went to a club that he was playing at. Yes, we bumped into a lot of people that we know over there.

Q: How's the documentary about your dad? Do you like it?

Soto: It's pretty good. It's like Felipe and I were talking one day and there's too much to put into just an hour film. So he has to pick and choose what he's going to put in there.

Rivera: It was good, yes.

Soto: If he could put more, he would put a lot more.

Q: What's it called?

Soto: Well, right now, it's just *A Tribute to Jose Chema Soto*. That's the title that he's given it.

Q: Nice. Are your children involved in the Casita?

Soto: Yes, I bring my girls here and make them do some work [*laughs*].

Q: How old are they?

Soto: The oldest is twenty-one. She's in college, so she don't really have the time to come here. But my second, she's fourteen and she likes to plant. She still remembers certain things that her grandfather taught her. "He said to do this and he said to put the seat in like this." I said, "All right, you do it how he taught you to do it."

Q: Good. And are your kids involved?

Rivera: My oldest, not really. He grew up here in the old casita and he was very close to my father. He also learned how to play drums over there but now he's like older, so he stays away a little bit. But he has a little history there in the old casita.

The little one, he grew up here when he was little. When he comes here, I show him how to plant and stuff like that but he doesn't like to be here. I don't judge him because when I was younger, I didn't like coming around here neither, not too often, because it was older people. But when he comes here, there's nobody for him to play with because everybody's older. He likes to be at his computer. You know how today's kids are, the phone and computer games and all that.

Q: So when you describe yourself to yourself, what do you say about your identity as New Yorkers, Puerto Rican, the Bronx? How do you think about who you are?

Rivera: I think it's a lot of things, Afro-Puerto Rican, Borinquen, Nuyorican, all that comes to mind.

Soto: It's the same for me. But if somebody asks me, I say I'm Puerto Rican and then they ask, "Well, where you from? You from here or Puerto Rico?" "No, my parents are from Puerto Rico but I'm Puerto Rican." Just because I was born here doesn't make me any less of a Puerto Rican.

Q: The casita's been a big part in helping to maintain that?

Soto: Yes.

Q: For you too?

Rivera: Yes. I think without that and this place, I would not be so attached to Puerto Rico and knowing people from the island and stuff. I think it would be more like listening to rap music and—

Q: One second, let me clip you back on. Let's see.

Rivera: Actually, learning the importance of what it is to preserve the music that's been around since the Seventeenth Century. It's important to Puerto Rico and the people over there and the pleneros and my father. So I think I would have never known that type of music. It would not be a part of my life. I'd be a different person, yes, a New Yorker *[laughter]* without the Puerto Rican spirit or love that I feel now for this place and for Puerto Rico.

Q: So do you have advice that you want to share with other people who are trying to maintain their culture and identity in New York, both the culture and identity and the space that helps make that possible? Do you have advice for how to do it?

Rivera: I think it's important to be around it and to practice it regularly because when you're not around it, you don't practice it, you lose it. You don't know what it is. In order to be able to be part of it, you have to incorporate it in your life and be around it to learn. You don't stop just because you hear or learn about it.

You have to actually be part to understand it. And to research more, to go out to the places where it came from, where the music started and learn the history of those people, listen to people talk to you about it. The books don't have everything but actually hearing it and being around people that talk to you about those things. It's important. Here, you get a lot of that. You get these people that come from the island, they talk to you about it or they share their music or you hear their music, you know where to go and look for bomba and plena. You know the artists and you get familiarized with different people, faces in Puerto Rico and stuff like that. It's important. It's not just one day, you have to practice. You have to be in it.

Q: What about—Desseree, maybe you can tell me a little bit about what it takes to actually preserve the space, like this, so that people can practice their culture? Do you have advice for how to preserve the physical space?

Soto: You have to work on it every day. It's not easy. It's never going to be easy. It can be a bit stressful sometimes but you have to have determination. You have to have some type of goal behind what you want to accomplish at the end, what you want people to remember when they come to a place like this.



Q: Do you think that being part of Nos Quedamos and Huerto y Cultura, and trying to get the Historic Registry, that those are important for protecting the space itself?

Soto: Yes, I think it's very important. I think everything that my father has done for this place was more for other people besides himself, especially when it came to the music. He wanted everyone to hear the music. That was the reason why he walked from Harlem all the way—he wanted everyone to hear what was bomba and plena, what he was listening to growing up. So I think he should have every and all recognition when it comes to the hard work he put into this.

Q: And do you feel like your work is in part to help maintain his legacy and build it up and share it?

Soto: Yes, because there's always one person that didn't hear about it. So me or my sister or my brother, even my mother, we are here to make sure that that one person that didn't hear about it is going to hear about it.

Q: The music and the man.

Soto: Yes.

Q: Do you think that it's important for people who are new to the neighborhood, who didn't live through its really difficult times, to know about the casita and be a part of it?

Soto: Yes, last year, I was going around collecting signatures for the street name and I actually went to the building where the old casita was. I said, I'm going to go to this building. I'm knocking on doors, and they said, "Yes, I know the place. I always grabbed grapes from the fence. I'd go in to get the peaches and the man is always sitting right there." They didn't really know his name, some of them. "The man was always sitting right there in the front and he would give me this and give me that." So it sticks. It kind of stays in someone's memories when they come in here, or even walking by.

Q: So tell me about the street. What street are you—tell me about it. I don't know about that.

Soto: Well, the street name, I started pursuing the street name after he passed away because I felt like this was his street. Even from the old location, coming to this one, it was always on Brook Avenue. So this was like his street and then learning more about what he used to do, because he wasn't the type to tell you, you would have to do your own research and ask other people because he wouldn't sit there and tell you, "Oh, I did this and I did that." So through Nos Quedamos, there were some people there who were working with him during that time. They started telling me about how the park was infected with drug dealers and addicts and stuff like that and he actually cleaned it up.

Q: So you're trying to get this block from 157th to 158th named after your dad?

Soto: Yes.

Q: How would you name it?

Soto: Well, they gave me a few options and I wrote down a few options but the one that stuck and the one that they chose was "Chema's Way", which I think fits.

Q: What does Chema mean?

Soto: I don't know.

Rivera: Chema is a nickname. I'm not sure what it means but it's just a nickname.

Q: Because your dad's name was Jose Soto, right, but everyone called him Chema.

Rivera: Yes. I'm not sure how he got that name either *[laughter]*.

Q: So where are you in the process of trying to get the block renamed?

Soto: Well, we're waiting for a date. We're waiting for a date and the final approval.

Q: Can you tell me how that works? You apply to the [New York City] Department of Transportation?

Soto: No, to the board—council. That's where we take it to.

Q: To the [New York] City Council?

Soto: Yes.

Q: And do you expect it to pass?

Soto: Yes.

Q: And what will happen then?

Soto: Then they will give us—it has to go through a few people, like a few people have to sign off on it. So we're waiting for that final go-ahead and say, yes, we're going to make the street the name.

Q: Then the city will add Chema's Way to this block? And will you celebrate that somehow?

Rivera: Oh, yes, we will *[laughter]*. Yes, we will.

Q: How does that feel in terms of preserving your dad's memory and his work?

Rivera: It will give us a little bit more stability here, knowing that we get the name. I think we'll have a better permanent space here. I mean they can't kick us out of Chema's Way *[laughter]*.

Q: How's your mom doing?

Rivera: She's doing good. She always misses him and always tries to keep busy. She comes here all the time in the morning to clean up and do what she always did, just without him.

Q: She lives right nearby?

Rivera: Yes.

Q: He passed a couple of years ago?

Rivera: 2015

Soto: Two years ago.

Q: I'm really sorry. Is there anything that you want to tell me that I didn't ask, that you think is important to have as part of this story about the casita or your father or your work to preserve his memory and the casita and the garden?

Soto: The only thing I would say is there was always a saying that "You haven't made it to the Bronx, if you didn't come to the casita." But I like to say, you haven't made it to New York, if you didn't come to the casita.

Rivera: I do everything today to preserve his memory here and to learn more about the culture and the traditions. I'll keep doing that, being part of what he worked so hard to build or to maintain, in the city.

Q: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Rivera: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]