NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

VIVIAN LOPEZ PONCE

Interviewer: Sebastián Castro Niculescu

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Sebastián Castro Niculescu: Hello, my name is Sebastián Castro Niculescu, and I will be having a conversation with Vivian Lopez Ponce for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is August 21, 2018, and this is being recorded at the New York Public Library offices in midtown Manhattan. Hi, Vivian.

Vivian Lopez Ponce: Hi!

Niculescu: How are you doing today?

Ponce: Fine, thank you.

Niculescu: Um, so, if you feel ready to start, um, we can just start with when and where were you born? And what was growing up like?

Ponce: Ah, I was born in Spanish Harlem, 116 Street, on Park Avenue. That was, at that time, it was, I was told that it was, uh, very rough, you know, I don't remember because I was very young, you know, but at the time that neighborhood was very rugged. I was told, you know, there was a lot of gangs at that time. So, but, at that time— My family moved to the Bronx afterwards. From there—from there they moved to the Bronx, but I was born in Spanish Harlem, that area, which is—you know. So, um, that's what I can remember—from there we moved to the Bronx.

Niculescu: So, most of your memories are from the Bronx?

Ponce: So much of my memory—the Bronx—and, uh, and that was also very rugged.... that was very rugged, ahh, basically, you know. I grew up on Simpson—Simpson Street, that was really very hard: addiction and everything else. Then from there we moved to College Avenue, and that was a little bit better. Then we moved back to Spanish Harlem, 118th Street, which was a little bit better that's where, um, a lot of the Spanish [inaudible] records started—you know, a lot of—you know, that's where my youth and everything else, that's where I started to discover, well, that I was, I was different. Really, I started in the Bronx. I was really young, but I knew I was different when I was really a lot younger, but I was too immature to even realize, too immature to even realize that something was wrong with my—me. It wasn't until I was a lot older that I started realizing that I need help. That I knew anything like that. I ran away from home; I slept in Central Park, ahh, for about a year. From there, I started working at the Continental—the Continental Bath House—for several months. Then I moved to Providence with some friends. I came back, ahh, I moved in with my mother for a while, and then I—something happened, I got arrested. I came out, and that's when I started transitioning. I discover myself. I was, like, maybe 19, 20, and that's when I really, you know—and ever since then, you know, my life has changed, you know. Ever since then, my life has changed. I've met beautiful people. I've really met beautiful, fantastic people. My family has been—supportive. They've been supportive, they have been—you know, they've been angelical. The only one that wasn't supportive was my father; but, my mother, she cried. I would think she would
understood because I was different. My grandmother, who is the strongest evangelical, she was the first person to get me a slip. When we went to our— me and my boyfriend went to dinner, because my nipples were showing, I was, my breasts were starting to grow and he got me a beautiful silk dress, and it was Thanksgiving dinner, and he kissed me, and my nipples were showing, and she tells me: “You have to wear a slip and wear clean panties.” I can never forget that. My grandmother, she was the strongest evangelical woman there is, and that's the love, that's the, you know, and that's— always stays there in my heart. Since then, you know, my family and my mother, and, you know, I've looked out for her, as much as I could, because my mother was separated from my father. And, um, I've started working; I went to school— Robert Fiance [Beauty School]. I graduated and everything else, ahh, but didn't really work out, because I tried getting a license— nobody, no models, no nothing, you know. We have a lot of hairstylists in my family. My aunt had her own shop. I have I don't know how many hairstylists in my family who are professionals, you know, that's why I tried to get into the business. But, I had no luck, so, that was done. So, I got into, ah, got into working in a health food store. Oh, and I was a nanny, I was babysitting two little babies for almost two years. I was getting paid, I was a nanny and changed the diapers and everything else. That was a beautiful thing to have. I was, I was looking out for two, these two beautiful little girls; they were like my own. [Phone dings] It was, it was an incredible experience, you know, to feel like a mother, to nourish them, to wash them up, to bring them over every morning and just, you know, it just brought me closer to the person I am. That experience is incredible. It just made me more of uhm, the person who I am. Then, they asked me to move to Puerto Rico with them because— they wanted me to move I mean the girls were very, I was valuable to them. The girls got used to me, they needed me to— they had more kids— and I was the nanny! I told them: "No, I have my own life, I can't move with them to Puerto Rico." So that was that. So, I met a friend of mine, she told me, ahh, well, ahh, I was working, started working in the After Hours. Sally's [Hideaway]. I got involved working and working, I did very good. Started doing drugs, and working, and that— you know— what was that. It was, ahh, it was crazy! It was fun, hectic. I met a lot of people, a lot of —beautiful young ladies. I can't say all of the names, but you know, these are— this is girls from the balls. I met a lot of the girls from way back— way back, I mean, you know, these is girls that— before even the balls were balls! I mean, I'm talking about— before the regular balls. These are Spanish girls that used to make gowns out of whatever you can find! Delightful ladies [inaudible]! This was before any houses were created, Crystal LaBeija was one of the [car horns] original ladies. Ahh, she was beautiful! I can't even explain that some of the beautiful women that I saw— that I worked with. I worked in lesbian bar, I mean, Kelly from Kelly's Village West— there were celebrities that used to go there all the time. And you would go from the After Hour to Kelly's, and this place was owned by the Mafia. The After Hour was owned by the Mafia. If you're listening to this, I'm probably not around anyway, so [laughs] I can say it now, because it's not— you know? But really, basically, they owned a lot of the clubs at that time, so— and it was safe. Really, it was— and it was fun. It was fun, you know, the girls that went, basically. A lot of celebrities went. We made good money. The girls made good money, a lot of them [inaudible] went — it was very exciting. It was exciting— it was— it was like feeling like you were huge, um, hope was rushing. It was a fast life, but you made, you know, it was fantastic! Do I miss it? No! I don't miss it because, because you know what? It was too fast. Too fast. There are a lot of beautiful people that I do miss, you know? I got involved with drugs, and you know, I really— I didn't need that. — you know? Every now and then I had to go
to— to run away to my mother's house and take a couple of days off because I says: "I need to get away and cleanse myself." And then go back. Sally sometimes used to tell me: "Vivian, you need to stay over here. You need a day off." Because I used to work 24/7, nobody— everybody would take off, but I work for them. I just didn't want— I just didn't— They were pro— I was very fortunate that everybody was very protective of me. That's something that I really truly loved because they loved me, and they protected— and I was a little bit crazy! But I was a fun-crazy person. That's something everybody said: "Vivian, Vivian—" you know, I was a fun-loving person. I was, you know, if somebody came: "Oh, Vivian, I need—" you know I try to give them— I always to give. You know, God blessed me, so I try to bless. I don't know. There's a lot more that I have to say, but right now, I'm—

Niculescu: I think that's like a really beautiful kind of, like, timeline that we can kind of go down now. Um, so, maybe to start, early, umm— What are your memories of the Bronx, of growing up there, of, like, did you have friends in the area? Did you go to school? Like, what was your-

Ponce: No


Ponce: No, all of the memories of the Bronx was a boy who tried, umm, you know was trying, umm, to molest me. Ahh, another boy that— I was too young that I, I tried to fool around with, that, you know, I didn't do anything with him because, you know, I started— nothing— I did fool around with him, but he didn't do any penetration. It wasn't— I didn't do nothing to him, he didn't do nothing to me, but it was just— I don't know, how can I say it? He touched me, he would get off, but it wasn't— it wasn't no penetration. And he was much older than me, you know? But I was attracted to him and I— I didn't know, and I was kinda scared, yet at the same time I was thrilled! I was around, what? — Ten, Eleven? And I was— I didn't know, you know? I don't know if my mother understood or what. I used to get into my mother's dresses and play Honey West! On top of the— on top— You know, she used to come in and I would try to put on her shoes! At that time there were chiffon dresses, beautiful chiffon, you know? Oh, my God, these were like period dresses. Oh my God they were gorgeous! [inaudible] My brothers were, my two brothers, they were, like, running around, and I'm playing Honey West, honey, because that was, you know, that was a program then. They're running around and didn't pay it no mind! You know? Ahh, at that time they had gangs. And, you know, for one Halloween I dressed up and they ran— they were running from one yard to the other. I remember they ran after me. And I'm running with my mother's heels [laughs] and my brothers are running with me! And I'm running [laughs] and I don't know what else happened, I can't remember, it's blank after that. But I remember they were running from one yard to the other. That's about all I can remember from that point. You know? I remember that that's when I decided. I said: "Okay." That's when my father— because we were in a home. My father and my mother was got separated— he put us with my mother. My mother was not prepared. Because when they divorced, my father took us, and he left my other brother, because I have— it's very compli— My father got married about four times. And there are two of us that were first born, with my mother, okay? And there was another born, but that's from another man that my mother married. So, my father left, and my mother remarried with somebody else, and got divorced. My father left, and then he had a

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mistress, and then he had another mistress. He got married again, then he got married again, but you know, he had two childs and then he had another one out of wedlock. So, anyway, he took those with us and he couldn't take care of us, whatever, so he put us in a Catholic home in Staten Island. So, we were in a Catholic home for a couple of years.

Niculescu: How old were you when you were—?

Ponce: [sighs] We were about eight years old— in Staten Island. I remember very clearly because it was a lot of grass, it was open field, and it was— There were nuns and priests and everything else. That's where I did my Holy Communion, my Confirmation. You know? My father was Catholic, my mother was Evangelical. That's where my father met mother: in church. In Evangelical church. 'Cause my mother was Evangelical, my family on my mother's side was Evang— protestant, they were. Uhh— it's— You know? I don't know, you know. I turned up the way I turned up. I don't know, you know? It happened— it happened— I'm not the first one. I have another cousin who passed away of AIDS on my father's side, and I have another cousin that's a lesbian that also passed away on my father's side. I have a cousin on my side who's lesbian, also. I have a second cousin—a second— third cousin that's also, who happens to be a lesbian. I have another second cousin who happens to be gay. So, really, you know what? You know. And they're all in my Facebook. Some of them got no, and they don't recognize me too much, but another one does. And, umm, but I try to reconnect with my first— second— second generation, so that way they know that, you know. In my Facebook I try to reconnect, so they know that, you know, that we are a community and we are—you know. And that they're not alone, that, you know, "Hey, this is going on. This is this; this is that." And I try to share whatever it is that I have that's going on in my world and whatever, so they can see.

Niculescu: Are, are these cousins, like, the same age as you, or?

Ponce: No. Um, I'm sixty-six. These are much younger. They're second-generation, third-generation.

Niculescu: Oh, okay, okay.

Ponce: I'm the oldest one in the family. Or, I should say, the youngest one [Niculescu chuckles]. Because, you know, what's surprising enough, I work—I have a heterosexual job. I work as a—in a laundromat now. I have my friends, umm, my boss is gay, and he has a lover. I've been very fortunate to have supportive friends who always look out for me. He is very demanding, but, you know, so am I. You know, he calls me "bitch," I call him "cunt." But he's like my brother: I love him dearly and he loves me. I mean, ahh, so anyway, the ladies— I'm very polite with the ladies. They always tell me: "Oh, beautiful lady!" you know, I'm always sometimes astonished because, you know, I'm trying to be [inaudible]. I'm sixty-six! Look, I'm a cranky old lady. You know, look at this: I'm jumping on this thing here. I'm not a mechanic, I'm trying to fix this! "Oh, but listen, I have a dryness on my hands, a dryness on my feet, and you're so beautiful!" I'm sixty-six years old! [Niculescu chuckles] I'm going through, uhh, they're "Oh my God! You're so—" and they're telling me their age and I'm older than they are, and they look—I don't know what! And says: "Oh you look so beautiful, you look so [inaudible] —" And I'm feeling, they
make me feel so— you know, they bless me. And there are some ladies who are much younger than me and, you know, I tell them: "Oh, you know what? I put moisturizer on, I put this—" I show them this. Sometimes they see me with curlers on. I tell them: "Look!" with pink curlers on. And here I go and put on pink curlers and what do you do? I'm gonna cut my hair, I'm gonna put pink curlers on! I do it in front of them, you know, hey! You know, and I do that really in front of them, you know. They see me with pink curlers on, and sometimes, you know, I tell them— I try to be— to be me, you know, and I guess they respect that, you know. Sometimes, you know, a lady gave me this [inaudible] —

Niculescu: And it's real! Oh, I like that.

Ponce: [laughs] It's real! My boss checked it out! [laughs] I said: "Oh! Okay! That was on my bucket list, I don't have to worry about it anymore!" Uhh, that's uhh, you know, I said, well, you know, I've, you know, I've said, you know, I'm blessed. I don't know I'm gonna be there. That was supposed to be a temporary job. Because I'm, I am kinda tired. I'm wearing out, you know? I sometimes— my memory comes and goes, comes and goes, you know what? I don't know! Tomorrow's never promised, so I'm still blessed that I'm still here. Every single time that I wake up my eyes is another blessing. You know? I hear somebody passed away of cancer— I just lost my ex-husband about, uhh, several months ago, and the same day I lost another niece, Karen Covergirl, who I loved very much. Oooh I knew her for a long time. She passed away the same day as my ex-husband. You know? And it was really heartbreaking for me. You know? 'Cause I was going to the hospital, and I was standing there. I missed him by three hours. We didn't have— I was his best friend. We were together for almost— on and off for almost thirty years. You know, we had broken up for about five, but you know what, I was like his best friend. He could tell me: "I love you, I love you" but, you know, we had broken up and you know what? I did still love him. He was like my— we were friends! We were just friends. I had been there for him, because he had— I can't— it's very— because I been there for so many friends passed away.[Becomes tearful] I mean, right there! I was there for my mother, was there for another friend, Frederick "Freddy" and it's like— people don't know how draining it is to be there and see your friends pass away. [sobs softly] You know, it's very hard. It's just— ahh! And then to hear the news that someone else, you know what? It's painful! [sniffles] I've lost so many friends, it's like— And I'm still here. I ask God: "Wow, why am I still here?" I know there's gotta be a reason, but, you know, I don't know why am I, really? I don't know! I'm just a cranky old lady! [sighs and pauses] Do you have anything to ask me?

Niculescu: Um, so, yes, so you mentioned running away from home, right, so I wanted to maybe see what your home life felt like before that, and what, like, made you do that.

Ponce: Well, you see, my home life before that— I was in a college prep program and everything else, but my father was really very strict. You know, and like I said, I was very confused. I was, you know, I used to clean house, I used to do everything, you know. I was really, you know, gay, I just— my father didn't allow me to work part time. He didn't allow me to do a lot of things. I was about to graduate. I had, like, several months to graduate high school. I couldn't go to work and work, I just got to work part time and everything. But after a certain time, I took a couple of detours— meeting some people. That's when I discovered that I was gay, and I detoured, and
a police officer caught me. They took me to my house, then, that's when I had to, I mean, you know, because they caught me doing the naughty-naughty, okay? All right! They caught me having sex! And it was in the restroom, okay, everybody does it. If you did the naughty, at that time it was very common. Let me put it like this: Really, this is like a book, all right? If you didn't do it, honey, you missed out on it. It was common in those days. It was very exciting! [Niculescu chuckles]. You don't know what you missed. Let me put it out there. So, and trust me, I met a lot of exciting men. Okay, now I put it out there! I was trying to be a little bit conservative, okay? So, ahh, that's when I really discovered that, you know, that I was— but I still wasn't sure about my gay-ness! Or, I did, you know, more or less. I was reading the "Sexology" book at that time. They're saying: "just because you're having sex with men, you're experimenting! That doesn't make you a ho- gay male!" I mean, that's just what sexology was saying. So, that's confusing you. So, a police officer found me, and it ended up I was still not completely of age, he took me to my house. This is what I feared: my father is a Puerto Rican man; very strict, very, very nasty, very firm man. They told— my stepmother, she was very open-minded. She was, but I guess she already knew. But the whole thing is: I was having her brothers!

**Niculescu:** Oh, my God!

**Ponce:** This is a doozer: I was having her three brothers on the down-low! [laughs loudly] But, really, yeah, I mean, you know, when I was having her three brothers, it was, oh my God, this is [laughing]. I was, well they were grown, you know, they were grown. One was going to the Army, the other one was, and the other one, you know, they were grown men. But, this is, you know, it wasn't like, what, it was like— but I was having— I'm telling you, it was— So, anyway, the thing is: a police officer offer took me, they took me to see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist, I spoke to the psychiatrist by myself. He tells my father and my stepmother: "He's a homosexual." Ahh, I don't know what my father felt, or whatever, but I know it wasn't too pleasant. We went home, I was scared, I know my father did not like to hear that. I was his first born, okay? His first born, he's not gonna like that. You know, he didn't like the whole idea that— I said: "Oh my God." In the middle of the night, I packed an Army duffel bag. Oh, no, not that night— I had bought some, ahh, some NyQuil or some kind of sleeping hack pills, and I tried to take them. Well, my stepmother saw them, and she took them away. I say: "Well, okay." She kind of figured that out, she was— I said: "Well, in the middle of the night when they was sleeping I kinda packed my clothes, put it in a Army duffel bag and I walked out. I didn't say anything. I didn't go to my mother's house because that's the first place that he probably would have said something. So, I moved to Central Park. I didn't go to my aunt's house, I didn't go to my fa— My whole family lived in Spanish. I had about four aunts, my grandmother lived around there— I didn't go bother any of them. So, I went, 'cause that would have been— it was— you know? To me it would have— it was kind of humiliating, you know? I didn't know what he was gonna say, how he was gonna put it, or how he was gonna degrade me, I didn't know. So, I just went to Central Park, and I slept there without any money, or what— I don't know if I had money or not, I can't remember exactly. I just slept there, and it was kinda cold, and I met, maybe one man that he could take me— during the night. I would sleep during the night and in the morning, I would have to get up and leave because he had to go to work. And then I would see if I could try to find work. You know, in that kind of condition or whatever, I have no knowledge of anything because my mind was so torn away or whatever. I didn't know exactly where to go.
I had no knowledge they didn't have — resources of any kind, you know? So, I didn't know exactly what to do, or whatever. I didn't have — I was just a fresh-born gay person coming out. You know? So, I didn't know exactly — I just didn't know exactly whether or not I — pushed out of there. I just can't — everything just went — it's blank after that for a while, I just kept doing that until I finally — I really can't say what had happened. I probably — I think afterwards I managed. It was a little while, I, I really can't say it's blank after that. I know I had finally found work, I think I had found work or a I went to my mother's house after a couple of months doing that. And then I found a job. 'Cause that's when I told my mother that I was gay, before. And she broke down because she didn't even know. When I went back — 'Cause she didn't know. I don't know she — my father didn't tell her that I ran away or nothing like that.

Niculescu: Oh, so she had no clue?

Ponce: No. My father hadn't told her anything. That's how he was. She had no clue that I was in the streets or nothing like that. — And I'm trying to recall, exactly, what it— how— what occurrence— I just can't remember after that what it— Because that experience was— I know when afterwards I started, you know, bein' that I was under the warm— I started looking for work. Oh! I tried going back to school, but it didn't work out, so I tried looking for work. I tried to go back to finish my— getting my diploma because I dropped out. I only needed like three months to graduate from the Monroe High School, 116th Street. They changed it now to High School of Science. So, my mother lived on Stratford [Avenue] in the Bronx, in Soundview, so I changed to go to Monroe, and I just couldn't. It was— I don't know— it was— from there on it was just like: I was a little bit— I was loose, I was wild. And then my hair was long, very curly, long and everything; it was like a curly "afro"— I have naturally curly hair. And I worked for a while. I had a boyfriend, but my life wasn't— wasn't— I don't know, I was still discovering myself. I still trying to put the pieces together. You know? It takes a while to really find out what— who you really are. You know? You just can't say: "This is who you are," it takes a while to find out. You know? And after going through those traumatic scenes and everything else, you don't just say: "Oh, here, I'm 'this!'" Your mind is confused, you're just still tryin'— you know— you're developing. It takes a while to develop. And once I— I saw what I am, I said: "this is, you know, my final" — I felt I was in my shell and I was in my comfort zone. I stayed to it. And here I am! Here I am: Vivian Lopez Ponce! And I took the name 'Vivian' because it was my sister's name. My original name was Innocencio. My sister was killed — by her mother, my stepmother, the one that I tell you that took— she was really very nice, but my father was not really a very nice man, and he drove her a little bit mad. 'Cause he was a what you call in Spanish 'mujeriego'. You know? He like to— he had a wandering eye for women, you know? And, um, he had another son while he was married to her, and they named him after my other brother. They both— two sons and they're named the same. And, she— that made her a little bit upset, and she became a little bit psycho, and my sister had one year I think of psychology or something like, or two years. And my stepmother took a gun— shot my sister, she shot— was gonna shoot my nephew— also, but he got away. It was tragic. She killed herself in jail. It was really horrible. But I was very fortu— 'cause I was— she tried to communicate with me. 'Cause I was the only person that I could really— you know, she understood me, she knew that, you know, that when I transition and everything, she understood that. [tearful] God, she understood that I was scared, she understood that too. And she probably saw that. I made a
dress for my sister, and she kept it— when my sister was a lit— this high. I made a dress by hand for Easter, and it was beauti— and she kept it years afterwards when I came to visit she showed it to me. My sister was beautiful, she had blonde hair, blue eyes. She looked like a little German doll. Ahh— well, I mean maybe we should be talking about Sally's. Sally's was a bar where I worked where it was cr— really fantastic. We had Dorian Corey, we had Myra Welch who was a Spanish entertainer, Dorian Corey— everybody knows Dorian—we had Chaka Savalas, but she didn't really work— yeah, she worked, Chaka Savalas worked there. Chaka Savalas was an entertainer. Lady Grace— beautiful entertainer, too. We had [Ms] Hawaiian Angie— beautiful lady. We had— oh my God— a Cuban— I, you know what, I'm very— right now— the names— there's a long list. There's a long list of beautiful entertainers. Ahh, the place was always, you know what, and these girls— ahh— they're attire was— exquisite. They were, you know, it was down to the "T". You know what? The clothing were made perfectly. Crystal LaBeija, she didn't do shows, but she was a regular patron there. It was such an honor just being around them. Socializing with them. Talking with and hanging out with them. Having cocktails with them. Even, well, umm, we did a little bit more than that, but whatever! Paris— Paris Dupree— another incredible person. Carmen Xtravaganza— another incredible person— hung out and— the shows— a lot of beautiful girls. They were great, you know, Jesse Torres, a friend— a dear friend and entertainer, who— she was mother of the house. Beautiful personality, you know? Ahh— how many other people? I was naming lists of girls— ladies of the house. The list just goes on and on and on. The memory is just— is just beautiful, the girls that just frequented that bar, that worked there, that you could say almost lived there, because you know what, there were always regular entertainers there. And you can say that, you know, that they lived in that place because they were— and I was very upset because there was a post in Village Voice I think it was, or something— some famous writer said something, but he's still around, and named and called the place I don't know what, and gave it an unfavorable— and I was very offended by it because, you know, this place is right off Broadway, and you know, we get very famous— we had very famous celebrities come to visit us. You know how many movies were done in that place? And he had the audacity to call it— I don't know what— you know, I said, you know how many movies people had done there? How many balls were done there? And everything else? And meanwhile, this person, I saw him in the Robin Byrd Show buck naked. Ugly looking person. I'm sorry— yes, I said it! I had to say it! Ugly looking body! Everything! His weewee and everything as gross— look it up. At the Robin Byrd Show. [gagging noise] Can we talk? [gags again] Ugly looking body. Had the audacity to insult my girls. I was totally offended.

Niculescu: Oh, when was this?

Ponce: It was a while back. It was almost 35 years ago. You know? 35 years ago. But, you know, I found it offensive because, you know, I'm proud of the girls that— you know— the girls were immaculate. The clothings were immaculate. The jewelry was immaculate. The entertainment is immaculate. I am sobbing. The place— well, you know what? Ah, the hotel really wasn't— not, you know, I mean— I'm gonna tell you, that hotel is— [disgusted grunt]— the hotel, you, you go there— forget about it. It sucked! But we're not responsible for the hotel! You know? We're not responsible that hotel. I hope they do something, really, because, you know? But, I don't know, I haven't even been— well, I passed by there the other day, and I think they're doing something now. The comedians that own the place, you know? They were very— I mean— we
stayed there, me and my ti— niece, Strawberry, we had a room together and, my God, I mean it was horrific! We had no other choice, because we let— we were living together, my— my— Strawberry and me, and I had left my— my so-called husband because he was horrific. I told Strawberry: "Pack up! Let's go! We're moving back to the city!" And we did. I left everything behind. Furniture and everything! I told my brother and my mother: "Mom, here are the keys, I'm leaving." I left the apartment behind with everything and me and my niece, Strawberry, we moved into a hotel right on top of the bar. And the ho— they were charging— overcharging— even though I worked in the bottom. They gave me no discount. We were paying on a daily basis [inaudible] And the place was horrific. The place was really horrific.

Niculescu: Do you remember the name of the hotel?

Ponce: The Carter Hotel, I think it was The Carter, I mean everybody knows it. Right down 43rd street. I think it was The Carter hotel. Was it The Carter hotel? Right there across the street from Times Square.

Niculescu: Wow. And, so, how did you get to start working at Sally's?

Ponce: I knew Sally for years. I worked for her for years. I worked— I used to work for her at the After Hour— the 220 Club.

Niculescu: And when did you originally meet Sally then?

Ponce: Ahh?

Niculescu: When did you originally meet Sally?

Ponce: Oh, my God! — A long time ago. I can't remember. A long, long time ago— maybe in the early se— eighties? Or early eighties, something like that— I don't— I can't, exactly, you know? A long time ago. Long time ago. I used to work— I used to work also at GG Barnum's. I don't know if you're familiar with GG— a very famous disco. Very famous disco. I think it was right off 43rd street, between 6th or 5th and— something. Huge, big disco! They had trapeze. Yeah, they had dancers dancing off the trapeze and everything. Oh, yeah, it's very well known. GG Barnum's— it's down in the records. A lot of celebrities used to go. They had one— one, two, three bars. A small little cabaret room. They had a big disco and a long bar.

Niculescu: And were you working as a bartender at all in these places?

Ponce: I worked as a cocktail waitress. I worked as a bartender at— at, uhh, Sally's. I worked as a waitress in the other places. I got promoted as a bartender when, uhh, at Sally's. I didn't even want— think— I didn't want the job as a bartender. My girlfriend Myra Welch told somebody: "Well, why don't you get her? Somebody who— gave up the position and she recommended me. I was very— I was very unsure of myself. And they said: "Go ahead, Vivian, go ahead— you can— " you know? I was— they tried me out and I took the job. I started off with, ahh, what? A weekend? From the weekend, they gave me more days. I was blessed— Myra Welch, you know,
was— was the one who recommended me, and— and from there on I got the job and I— I— ever since then I st— you know— and I didn't remem— I couldn't, you know— my memory, I have a bad memory, and— you know— I don't think I was a very good mixologist, but I used to make good, strong drinks. [chuckles] I used to make good, strong drinks! But, you know what? They said— I don't think I was a good mixologist. My girlfriend, Giselle, now she was a very good mixologist. You know? I was just had a good personality, you know, a very cheerful one. I had a girlfriend of mine call my boss, Jesse, tell her that I stole a whole box of the sambuca. That's what they told me. I had a— I was hysterical because, you know, it wasn't true, but they told me they called Jesse up to tell her that I took her box of sambuca and had it hidden in the closet. But, because I used to drink sambuca—she knew I used to get off and I used to socialize, you know? 'Cause some of the girls that used to come in and you say: "Excuse me, Honey—what? You don't have a drink in your hand? Excuse me, just we have to pay bills here." You know,"A lady always has a cocktail. What? You don't drink liquor? Well, ask for a cranberry and orange juice— that's healthy, girl!" Yeah, no, they used to come, sit down— oh! You know, they want to make money, but you don't have to have a dr— you know it doesn't have to be alcoholic beverage. You know? Oh! They wanted for me— they want to come in. I'm sorry, it's business. This is a bar! They pay rent! They wanna go— wanna come— meet a guy, make money. Oh! They wanna make their money, but the bar? They have to pay bill! They have to pay a light bill; they have to pay rent. Oh! But they can come in, meet a guy, go out— and what about the establishment? If it was their place, what would they do? Oh! When they go to a— when they have gonna do an out call, and somebody tell them: "You have to go 'here' and meet this guy" they have to pay the person who they call— that's the 'out call' foreman. That's a business too. That's what they have to think on. But, no: "well, you know, you don't ha—" I tell them: "Girl! You're there modeling? Excuse me!" [laughs] and they used to, you know: "Oh! Vivian! You gotta—" I said: "Honey, we're not here to model! We're here— this is—" [laughs] And sometimes I used to just give them a drink. "Okay, here. This is your first one, okay. Next time—" "Oh! I'm not drinking! I have— I just took a hormone shot!" "Well, Honey, cranberry and orange juice is healthful." You know, they used to tell me: "I'm not drinking, I just took a hormone shot." "Oh, really? Well, cranberry and orange juice is good!" "Oh! At—" "Girl! Ahh, grenadine! Orange juice and grenadine is good!" They gave me all kind of excuses and I would tell them. I mean, really, everybody knows this true. Everybody that knew me, they knew that I was— you know— I was— you know— they, they knew I was coocoo like that. And then, you know, somebody would come in and they were— they were new and from out of town I tell them: "Girl! What is—?" "Oh, I'm from—" You know, I tell them: "Here, welcome to New York City!" and I would give them a drink! Sit down, relax, you know? And I tell them: "This person is this, this person is that, this person is this." I tell them makes them feel at home. I try to tell them: "This person is this kind, avoid this guy or this guy" if I knew already tha— who it was, you know? That's— you know— that's— that's the person I was. If I was, you know, 'cause I was myself familiar with the establishment, and I try to make myself familiar with the people. Oh, and sometimes I would make myself familiar with the men. Sometimes the men, they try to borrow money from me. OH YES! they try to borrow money from me, so they can go out with a girl! OH YES! I tell: "Really!? Oh, you wanna borrow money from ME? Well, listen, if I'm gonna give money from me I wanna get something back!" "OH YEAH!" "Oh, when are you coming? No." But they, you know, they already knew me. You know? I said: "Really? You wanna get some—" and, you know, next time they came, I did— I did lend out some money, you know— I mean— And, when they came
back, they— I told them, and some of them tried, I said: "Oh, no no no no no no no, you gotta give me my money back!" You know? And they used to— you know— come in and bring me— and, well, of course I charged interest! "Oh, no!" Why? I'm gonna give them my money, and not charge interest? What kind of businesswoman is that? Now, some of them used to bring me gifts. Oh, yeah! I had jewelry— rings— [swallows] well, I mean, that's— um— being a business and everything. I mean, not that I ever kept anything! I used to— you know— sometimes I'd just give them away to my girls. Sometimes I, you know— sometimes I say: "Oh! That's a pretty— [inaudible]" I used to give my— you know? I used to— You know, I really didn't really ever kept anything. That's just— that's just the type of person I am. But I used to get a little bit bombed— a little bit too much— Well—

Niculescu: But it sounds like you we're like, not only, like a good businesswoman, but a real figure in the whole community.

Ponce: Well, I should think I was! Now I'm just a— over-the-hill person. [chuckles]

Niculescu: Um, so— do you have any memory of— I'm just really interested in, like, what Sally's was like, like the space. Like, how was it set up? What was the—

Ponce: Oh! When you walked in, there was a round bar. You had to walk up, there's a round bar, then there's a little— little— on the side— you had to walk up a couple of steps and then there's another big space there, and they have a pool table. They have a pool table, too— ahh— Oh! You walk— and they have a pool table on the side, and then they have, like, another small dance floor, and then you walk back down, and then, in the back, there's a big ballroom. It could be closed off, and it could be open. That's where they have a lot of balls. A lot of the balls— Paris Dupree— ahh— Octavia St. Laurent had her ball there, Paris Dupree— Pepper LaBeija had her ball there I believe. Ahh— another girl [Consuela Cosmetic] had her ball there— a famous girl, too. I can't remember her name right now who passed away. She— I believe she passed away— I don't know— she passed— well, she had something. A documentary film went and— She also did a documentary on us. She did "Mirror Mirror" out on the room. I dunno— she has a documentary called: "Mirror Mirror" with Gina Germaine in it, who I knew for a long time also.

Niculescu: And, did you ever participate in any of the balls? Or, were you just kind of—

Ponce: You know what? Maybe when I was younger, I partici— maybe in one. Just for [name unintelligible]— [chuckles] She used to be my roommate— I don't know, you know? She was my roommate. I went in one, maybe, just for the fun of it, but, ahh— And then I did one for— I was in a ball for Octavia. I was working, and I don't know what! I got kinda drunk and I said— I walked, and my— the dress— the zipper just went WHOOP! and opened up on me and I said: "Oh, well." You know, I was just—I just walked for the fun of it because I knew I had no— you know? I justCourse I know I don't have that— you know? 'Cause I know I don't have a standing chance— I don't have that artistic talent for— I don't have the allure for— the elegance for walking, you know? You have to have practice and, you know— I don't have that— you know? I don't have that— you have to have that— you have to be in constant, constant, constant— I'm— you know, I'm just a plain ordinary worker. I— you know, am the
type of person that has to be— you know, I don't wanna— [phone rings: Men At Work's "Who Can It Be Now?"]— I'm sorry—

Niculescu: No worries. Umm— so, what were you saying?

Ponce: So, I don't have that— I don't have that— I don't have that— that— you know— what it is it takes to walk. Yeah— so you have to have that air, you know? You have to— I don't know, for me, sometimes you have to be a little bit— uh— "obnoxious" I call it. To me, you know, to me it's that— you know, to me, you know it looks like kinda like you're being snobby. But that's just the way it is. You're not, but that the way it is, and I just— you know? It looks like your being— but it isn't, it's just that— the style that you have to be. I'm not— it's just not my— not my forte. That's not me— you know— you have to be poised, you have to be— and I'm not. I have to be very relaxed. [chuckles]

Niculescu: You also mentioned "your girls." And so, I wondering how you got to meet girls that you maybe mentored— or took care of— or, like, what that relationship was like?

Ponce: Well, ahh— well I call just about every girl that I— were in groups, you know? Ahh— girls that I had spoken to that had asked me for advice, you know? Because I had girls stop me, and, you know they ask me— you know? I had girls, that had tell me— umm— "Well, you know—I— I admire what you do— I would like to, too." You know, I had girls tell me: "I wanna be a bartender, I like that idea." I says: "Well, you know, you could be one, you know? You just have to—" you know? And there have been girls that said: "Oh!" But then, I tell them— some of them go to bar— schoo— I didn't go to a bartender school, you know? There are people that, you know— you could go to a bartender school and get a license, which is something that I didn't do— could have done but I didn't. And joined a union and everything. Well, which is something that would have never occurred to me. You know? Because I didn't even have my name changed at the time. Now I have my name changed, I have my gender changed— on my birth certifíc— everything is changed, you know? I've— it says "female" on my birth certificate, I had my— basically everything is changed. So, I mean— but at that time it wasn't. It didn't even phase me, it didn't even— you know, because I always worked with the gay community, so I didn't see that as an issue, you know? But, and I always worked with my gay friends, even when I wasn't— I always— all my— all my bosses were gay or lesbian or what. They— those are the ones who employ me. So, I was always blessed that way. When I worked in a herbal store, my boss was a lesbian. She had her lover and she— you know? When I worked— well, when I was a nanny, they were a heterosexual couple that was a married couple but they— you know— they loved me. You know? They trusted me with their kids! Since they were born! I was there for the delivery! I saw the baby come out! [laughs] Ever since then I got— you know— I was the one that— So I— you know— they were something special for them— for me. The exception— they were the only exception, but everybody else that I had worked for were— which is something, really. I've been very fortunate.

Niculescu: And, so, uhh— I'm also interested in— Before we started recording, umm, you mentioned living around Christopher Street, right? Umm, was that before or after working at Sally's?
Ponce: No, this was while I was working at Sally's! Well, no, this was while I was working at the 220 Club. Because you know who owned the apartment? Sally. We were subletting from Sally's. Me and my girlfriend, Billy, we were— we were roommates— we were subletting from Sally's. The apartment was, at that time, 500. She was only paying 250. We were paying 500. Right on Christopher Street. Right now, that apartment goes for— I don't know how much. It's a little— the bathtub was in the kitchen. You walk in; the bathtub was in the kitchen. There's a small little room on the side in the back. The living room was in the— to the front. But it was still, like— For that area there?

Niculescu: And, so, so I'm assuming you would, like, commute up from Christopher Street to Sally's every night. Or, around every night, right?

Ponce: Yeah—

Niculescu: Yeah, and so—

Ponce: Oh, no— um, no— I didn't— no— at that time it was at—

Niculescu: The 220— sorry—

Ponce: We could have walked from the 220 to there.

Niculescu: Oh, yeah— yeah— okay— So, was there— I'm wondering if there was, like, maybe a different sort of, you notice something different about, like, the Christopher Street scene, and what that scene was like at the time?

Ponce: Ahh— really? The scene— basically, no.

Niculescu: Mm hmm— It was, like, the same folks, like, coming around?

Ponce: Yeah! The same! Christopher Street is Christopher Street, you know? People still hang around the street out there. The only thing is that— you know— uh— they still had boutiques, they still had stores, they still had— it's just that they changed— you know, now they have different bars, they have more— different restaurants, you know? Christopher Street is still the same! That church is still in the corner there that has always been there. They took down the bookstore that was in the corner right there. 'Cause they had a bookstore right in that corner there. They took that down. That— that theater is still right there— we lived right— right next to the theater. We lived right on top of the theater. Our door we walk in, that theater was right there.

Niculescu: And, were you living close the piers?

Ponce: Yeah! I mean, you could walk to the— you know, we walk two blocks two blocks away from the piers. And, at that time, the piers didn't look like that. They were all rinky-dinky and
all— umm— forget about it. Now, forget it! The piers, they were, like— oh! Not that we went
to the piers at that time. Because we were, you know— Sally, at that time— Sally, at that time,
lived right next to the church. She had bought a whole loft apartment and had redone the whole
loft apartment. Right next to the church. There's a gated little thing, you could walk right next
to the church. There's a little black gate. You look up, on the fourth floor, there's a loft right
there. Whenever I pass by I look up, and I say— I say: "Sally." But that whole loft, it's— and he
did that whole loft. And I said: "Wow!" I dunno, he probably changed it all out, but— That whole
loft was— [sighs] Every time I walk by, I say: "Sally." And whenever I would walk on the piers
and I see Ty's (I mean Ty's Bar) and I look across the street— you know, the Hanger Bar's right
next to the building, too, so— So, it's, like, a lot of memories whenever I walk by. A lot of
memories. Beautiful memories; good memories. But, I remembered also the gay pride we used
to hear all that noise at th— Oh! My God! And many of them were [inaudible] Late at night we
could hear all [drawn out] the ruckus— all the ruckus. With the window open you could hear all
the ruckus, all the ruckus from the street. But now, I don't know, I'm not there— not any more,
you know. But it was late at night— you could hear all the— all the people talking, and they
were: "We should have lived on the top floor, the last floor."

**Niculescu:** And you could still hear it all?

**Ponce:** You could still hear all that noise. People talking and "Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah
blah blah." Ad you said: "Oh, my God!" It was incredible, if you think about it, it was— And to
think that we got locked out! Yes! Because my boss didn't pay one month's rent— We had paid
the rent to her! We used to pay the rent to her, she was supposed to pay the landlord. She didn't
pay the landlord. And we had fox furs, jewelry, and everything, and we lost it. We had fox fur,
mink coats, everything! We lost it. We lost all our possessions. They padlocked our door. [laughs
and exclaims] They padlocked the door! That was a very— that was a good apartment— they
were dying to get— You know what!? They wanted to boost that rent up. They wanted to boost
that rent UP! And that's what they were waiting for— padlocked the apartment. That
apartment is going for very good money now. This happened, I don't know how many years
ago. Long, long time ago. About— wow! Maybe forty years?

**Niculescu:** So, you're saying, the late seventies, probably?

**Ponce:** [Inaudible response]

**Niculescu:** So, what— What did you do after that? How did you try to make up losing all your
possessions?

**Ponce:** You know what? I don't remember. We got a room or something, I don't know. I don't
remember exactly what happened, what we did. We started all over again. I know we had lost
everything we had. Our clothes, everything we had, because we couldn't go back— back in.
Nothing. Fur coats, jewelry— I know that that landlord racked up in that apartment. Not only
with renting it, but what's in it. And I never thought about it afterwards, you know, that there
were at least four coats in there. That's not including the jewelry— now that I'm thinking about
it.
Niculescu: Yeah, probably left it in there and gave it to someone—

Ponce: My cousin— my roommate had a good sugar daddy. So, yeah. Umm, anyway, that's over and done with, and she's in Heaven. Both of them are in Heaven. I didn't think anything of it—well, I did, but we were out in the streets. I don't even remember what happened. I can't, you know— now that I've remem— mentioned the Christopher Street thing. That was in the past.

Niculescu: Okay, well, before we talk a bit more, like, past— down on the timeline. Umm, also before this interview you mentioned, like, marching with Sylvia, and trying to think if you had, like, come across Marsha P. Johnson at any point, and I just wanted to know if you had any more thoughts about that, or what it was like? The transphobia?

Ponce: Well, we used to go to a— groups at Moche's. From there, we used to go to the church and eat. And we had groups there, too— at the church. Used to eat there. We had the groups at Moche's and, umm, also we used to march— I think there was a trans-march, you know, and a couple other marches and it was always excited when we all marched together. You know, our posters and everything, it was always umm really exciting. And when we um, you know, went to um 14th Street, the Circle there, and we hung out there and that was always, always. And I was trying to make it— to go to that march, and unfortunately, being that— ahh— I always— being I was in a steady act, I wasn't a spokesperson— I always had some kind of schedule that I can't. I always had something coming up that you— you had me unavailable to be at that march. And I always loved going to that march, regardless of whether I have— 'cause I have my— a bad ankle. But, you know, ahh, I alw— I love that march! Walking around and doing that march for me is so— so inspirational. And I did what I do with marching with Sylvia every single time. It was really very inspirational and has always been afterwards.

Niculescu: And, was Sylvia just around at the marches, or did you know her?

Ponce: Ahh

Niculescu: Was she just around at the marches? Like, marching with you? Or did you know her outside of that context?

Ponce: Ah, no, I didn't know her outside of that context. I knew her active from the groups!

Niculescu: Oh, yeah! Yeah yeah yeah.

Ponce: Because we used to do the groups! And from the groups we used to walk together to the church. Me, Sylvia, the two girls that live upstate. What have, what, her name— ahh— they're lovers, I think— they live upstate. I think they're— umm— my friends. They knew Sylvia very well. I think they were part of— they started S.T.A.R.S.

Niculescu: Oooh! Okay, okay.
Ponce: That whatchamacallit— I also, I'm also an old friend of— ahh— Vicky. Vicky and I were— um— we used to hang out together when we were young. Vicky Cruz. We used to hang out, also, at G.G. Barnum's at Casa Dalio when we were young. And a couple of other girls. Ahh, Vicky didn't mention we were one other girl— the two girls were trying to find that information about Marsha P. Johnson. I saw that documentary. And, you know— So, Gi— ah— no— ahh, yeah, ahh— No, so, we used to sit down and talk at the table. Me, Sylvia, the two other girls. That was before they moved out of town, you know? Another blonde girl— ah! Sylvia's roommate at the time - a girl with long hair. Some— several other girls— you know, I'm trying to remember— I can't. But it was me, Sylvia's roommate, the other two girl— we used to sit down, we used to do groups.

Niculescu: And what were the groups particularly for, what can you —?

Ponce: They were trans-groups. Trans-groups and we were talking about our different issues, with, you know? I can't remember exactly because this was a while back.

Niculescu: And, do you think this was one of your first, like, encounters with activism? Or....

Ponce: No, I used to be also Housing Works. Housing Works is, um, very active on housing, you know? I became a civil rights activism, ahh, basically at Housing Works. You know, I became, ahh, about everything, you know? I done a lot of things. We went to Albany, and we went door to door. I mean, you know, that's where I learned to— I got— that's where I got my power and my energy. Housing Works gave me a lot of strength; I gave them a lot of gratitude because Housing Works gave me the strength to really empower me to, you know— They gave me a— they empowered me. When I first went there I didn't, you know, I jus— I don't know. But they did empower me. I always felt that I was— and I was just diagnosed with HIV and everything else, but they did pick me up. And I became alive. And a coup— several months later I became an HIV act— ahh, spokesperson and with that I even, I even came out even more. Wish I could have done a lot more, I wish I had a lot more information, I wish I could have been a lot more open-minded. I think I, you know, maybe I could have done a lot more. In the past I was maybe limited, I don't even— I don't know. You know? I just think that maybe if I— I think, you know, I feel blessed 'cause I did have people say: "Thank you." You know, I had one person, you know, came up to me, she's "You know what? Thank you, you know, for—" she's— And I said— I said— maybe one or two people have come to me. I said: "Well, you know what? At least I reached one person." You know what? That one gratitude means a million to me. And if that one, then there's one, that one there, you know what? There's a lot more. They just don't— some people just don't have a way of expressing it. And some people don't have a way of understanding it, because it jus— you know, I have had issues with people who still don't understand the whole thing of HIV. And I have been subjected to it, and I've— it's very unfortunate. And transgender. And I'm sixty-six years old, and I says: "My God! These people are still in the back woods!" And it's hitting home. At this age, in 2018, and you know, I says— still— I hear— I see people doing this and I said: "We still need to keep on talking about how can we reach these people?" You know? We're in 2018. We're still alive and human beings. We are human beings. We're not backwards, we just human beings. We bleed, we breathe, we have feelings. I had somebody say that they think I want— that I'm a man, that I think I wanna wear women's clothes. At my age!
And this is somebody that's personal. Personal. Not personal to me, but personal to someone that I care about. I said: "Really?" You know, I says— I said: "You know what? I really don't care what they say." But it— all right— I just leave it at that. They were very upset about it. I said: "Don't worry about it. You know what? It doesn't affect me." But, how they act and react, you know what? That's gonna affect some of their kids. They think I'm bad. That's what they're teaching their kids. And that's not good. That's really bad. And their kids are gonna have that kind of attitude. They're not gonna be, uhh— It's gonna be very hard for them to rationalize in society. It could be harmful for them.

Niculescu: And, so, when did you first, kind of, get in touch with Housing Works?


Niculescu: Okay, okay. And, so, was that— So, just like—

Ponce: I believe it was in 2003. I'm not even sure. Maybe in 2002? Something like that.

Niculescu: And, so, you were working at Sally's in the 80's, right?

Ponce: Yeah.

Niculescu: So, how long were you at Sally's?

Ponce: Wow! I don't— I can't tell you that I didn't— you know, I don't really— I can't even remember how long Sally's was open. You know? But I was with Sally ever since. For the long duration. Because, you see, Sally had a— I dunno— something happened with the 220 Club. Sally left. They changed it, the 220, and called it the "Page Six." Sally was in charge. They changed it to "Page Six" to make it look— feel— look— they gave it an overhaul. They made it look a lot more classy, I suppose. Yeah, they changed the whole place up. They, then they say they're going to change the clientele. But, really it was basically the same thing. And, you know, basically the same thing. Then, they said they didn't want any— but basically, they had the girls working there. Me? Said what? They still had the trans girls working there. Okay. Now, something happened, and Sally left. There! I don't know what happened—it was something— and Sally left. And, when she left— ahh— there was a period of time I stayed at the club, but Sally had left. There was a period, I don't know how long—several months or a year, I'm not sure. But I had stayed there because I was working, and that was my other boss Jimmy Peanuts—he used to be the manager of Crisco Disco. Okay, they were partners, but Jimmy stayed. So, anyway, then I don't know what happened. They closed— they closed Page Six, which was the original Sally's, so Jimmy went to Sally's. Oh, no! He went to, uhh, there was a little Sally's— No, no, no— I had— they closed Page Six, so I went to live with my mother. Okay! I wasn't working for a while. Now that you're refreshing me, I wasn't working for a while. Because they closed down the After Hour. So, Jimmy Peanuts went to work for Sally. Worked— had a small little bar. It was on 43rd Street, and it was called "Sally's." It was called "Sally's", but it was a small little Sally's, and it was just "Sally's." Okay? Now, it was a little bar, a little nice cute little bar. So, I don't know what happened or whatever— I started frequenting— I started going there
afterwards for a little while. That's when I went to hairstyling school - trying to figure out what I was gonna do. Then, finally, you know, I— I got a job there. And then, after a little while, something happened with the roof of the place [a fire damaged the interior]. The roof of the place fell down or whatever. So, they needed to move because the roof wasn't working. So— umm— two doors down— the Saigon Rose (that's a bar underneath the Carter Hotel). Jimmy Peanuts is a very small person. Then he— a good manager. So, he went down and spoke to the Korean owner, 'cause the place wasn't open. Or it was open, but it wasn't doing any business. So, he talked to the owner of the place, and they make a business deal. So, everybody goes, and goes to the other bar. So, now the new place is not called "Saigon Rose" it's called "Sally's Hideaway." Or "Sally's II." The other one was "Sally's Hideaway," this is "Sally's II." 'Cause it was a little thing that it was called "Sally's Hideaway" so this one is called "Sally's II" because it was bigger.

Niculescu: Yeah, and "Sally's II" was where they would have the balls, and things like that. Okay.

Ponce: The other one was "Sally's Hideaway" because it was a little thing. It was a small little bar. Little club, you know, a small little thing. It was a "Hideaway" because it was like a hideaway! This is— the other one was "Sally's"— "Sally's II" because it was: walk in, you had to walk up around the bar. Then, you walk up and there's a platform like "this" and there's a pool table, and then, there's a dance floor. Then, around the bar, you walk a little bit, there's— there's a big ballroom. Lights and everything else. Beautiful scenery. You know, painted scenery and everything else. But, and then you had wooden sliding doors that you could close and everything else. And you could just occupy the flat, and that— and the ballroom you could use on special occasions. So, they used just "this" and "that" because that was enough for the time being. They used the top floor for shows and everything else, and then they st— and afterwards they started using the ballrooms for balls. That's why they call it— you know. That was— that's when they started getting jumpin'. That's when they— people started renting it for movies and everything else. They did a rock disco, which I was in. Yeah! I was one of those stand-ins or whatever. Ahh, Irish rock. I was in the— ahh— Cyndi Lauper did a video there. And [inaudible] an Irish Rock band did a vi— ahh— did a thing there. Several— several— several movie clips were brought— done there. Several movie clips were done there. I was in one of them: the Irish band, and we were just like part of the girls from there, you know? It was like, maybe what? Seven girls? Seven girls that were just— just sitting there pretending we were talking, and "blah blah blah" you know? That's about it. And Sally's, you know, at first it was really— it was fun! It was fun, it was— you know? It was— I was just felt insulted that he— he just came out and— everybody knows who the writer is.

Niculescu: Was it Michael Musto?

Ponce: Yes. Yes, that's her. [laughs] That's her. And she looked horrible, butt— I mean naked on the Robin Byrd Show. This happened I mean thirty-five years ago. Robin Byrd had been to Sally's. I mean, we had everyone come to Sally's. They used to— I mean, like, really! A lot of celebrities came to Sally's - they partyed at Sally's, but why give them a bad name? And these ladies were flawless! Their clothes was impeccable, their jewelry was "on point"! Their mimicking was absolutely on point! The person that they took the picture was a Cuban girl who
looked exactly like Celia Cruz. You could look at her picture— she looked a pure perfection of a young Celia Cruz! I mean, I'm telling you: when you look at her you think: "A young Celia Cruz." A beautiful, beautiful! And her clothes was nothing but perfection. I found it so insulting, 'cause I loved her. You know, and I mean the clothes is nothing but [inaudible] but I know the person who made the clothes, and he was a dear friend to me, and he was nothing but a perfect seamstress. His name was Lorenno and he used to come to my house and I see him so close. He's just this close from me and he did nothing but perfect clothes. He used to sew my clothes also and he did— he was a perfect seamstress. He was from Chile. And his name was Lorenno. We used to call him Lorenno.

Niculescu: Wow. And, so, it seems like it had its own, like, little economy around it, too. In terms of, like, who your seamstress was, who, like, was at the bar, like, yeah. Yeah. That's really interesting, I think—

Ponce: It had it— well, it has you know— it had this community! You know? Edelweiss was down the block, girls from Edelweiss used to come. You know, we had someone from Sally's to down to Edelweiss. You know? Edelweiss was— umm— maybe on the 10th Avenue. People used to go to Edelweiss, and Edelweiss used to come to here. We used to go to Edelweiss, Edelweiss is right here.

Niculescu: And, I'm tt when, like, movies started to film in Sally's and, like, people were making videos, like, what the response was, like, whether, like, I mean were they all, like, fine with the girls, like, was it all good or was there some tension or how did it feel to have, like, bigger mainstream people, like, coming into the bar?

Ponce: No, the girls liked it. Oh, no! It was, you know, I— I— we were in the New Yorker Magazine! I would, like— my picture came out in the New Yorker Magazine. My picture came out in New Yorker Magazine because, ahh, as you all know, Dorian Corey passed away. They found a mummy in her closet, you know? I used to go to her house. Yeah, me and Sally and several others, we used to frequent her house all the time! We never knew she had a mummy in her closet! We never suspect— we would have never known. She had that mummy in that suitcase. We couldn't go over there, we went over there, chat "this and this" and she would pay no mind! We walk by the house and where she had the mummy. It was in— in a s— she had a little room. It was a little room, she had lines of clo— umm— fabric. It was like a walk-in closet, a huge walk-in clo— she had lines of fabric hanging on one side, and on another, and the other, and the other. And she had a long foyer, and she had shelves of— of— of fabric also. And then, at the end, she had another room where she had her sewing machine. She had, like, maybe three sewing machines, with a window. And in the front, she had the living room and her bedroom. You would never— you know, know that she had that mummy in that little— I don't— I— I didn't see the suitcase, but—

Niculescu: And what was everyone's response once everyone found out and it became, like—

Ponce: We all were shocked! We were shocked— I never— you know? We were shocked! 'Cause, you know, really— I saw— really, we would have never thought— [inaudible expressions
of shock]— she— really. Well, what can I say? She passed away, and they found that she— really, I just wonder what was the reason why they happened. Well, she must have done it because somebody tried to do something wrong to her! And, you know, things do— you know? There are men who are ver— you know and— But that was— wow! It was a shocker! I know I was interviewed by a writer. I think I was quoted, whether— you know— whatever I said. 'Cause I still have the magazine, the New Yorker, and they took a picture of me, and Barbara Hurt, and, uhh, several— a couple of other girls. My hair was curly and then and long. I didn't like the pose, but what the hell? They didn't tell me nothing. My feet look like all crooked and everything else. I still have the picture from the magazine. It's worn out, but I— But, you know, that was— it was like a— you know— You wonder! You know, we also interviewed for the movie "To Wong Foo [Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar]" Also, some of the girls got to go to be in it, you know? Betty [Cateria?] she was in it. Passed away, may she rest in peace. And I know there were some other girls who went, but I didn't really get to see them but they was both, they were there. I didn't get— you know, but I went to— I did go— I did interview. But, I didn't— I didn't.

Niculescu: So, umm, what happens after your, kind of— What happens once, like, Sally's isn't a part of your life anymore? At what point does Sally's start to— to—

Ponce: I found another job at Cat's— Cat's Bar. I was working at Cat's Bar and Sally's. I was working at Sally's - somebody from Cat's Bar, uhh, somebody tells me: "Oh! We want you to work at Cat's." So, I started working at Cat's. I started working a double shift. I get off at Sally's and I go to Cat's. I was working double shifts! From Cat's to Sally's and from Sally's to Cat's, and then, sometimes, my boss wanted me to go: "Let's go to the After Hours." Jeff— I said: "Oh my God, Jeff" and I loved him dearly. He was my boss, ahh, my friend, ahh, we're going— I said: "Oh, whatever" and when I got home I had to get up again to go to work, and that's how it was. Then, when Sally closed, I stayed— Thank God I had Cat's to lean on. I lived on 43rd Street. I had— I got a room— finally got a room on 43rd— 43rd Street. Lived there for I don't know how many years. From the Carter—the same owners— you know, Jimmy lived there also. My Niece, Strawberry, got a room there also. Another friend of mine who just passed away a couple of months ago got a room there also, then. [inaudible] got a room there also. And, ahh, so, anyway, it was— umm— you know. We got a room there, and, umm, I used to go to work from Sally's to 48th Street: Cat's Bar. Sometimes I used to walk, sometimes I used to take the cab. When Sally's closed down, I went to Cat's Bar. And when Cat's Bar closed— ahh— What did I do when Cat's— when Cat's—? Oh! Nothing! I just— I was collecting— I was collecting so— until I didn't— and that's when I moved to the Bronx. I decided that's when I found me a place— a bigger place, more comfortable place, and I moved there. I moved to the Bronx and I've been there ever since. That's when— then that's when I— ahh— Oh! I joined, ahh, a health group in Yonkers, but that was— ahh— I don't know it didn't last very long. Then, that's when I— I joined Housing Works afterwards.

Niculescu: And, how did you start getting involved with Housing Works?

Ponce: I got started with— involved with Housing Works through a— through a health group in Mount Vernon. You know? I was already getting involved in a health group in Mount Vernon, so I joined, ahh, Housing Works. I went to the Gay Men's Health Crisis a couple of times. But I
had just started my medication: my HIV medication. Ahh, it wasn't the proper medication, I was being overmedicated, because it was— I had just started, and I really— The person who gave me the medication wasn't too sure, exactly, what my whole diagnosis was— just being precautious. So, I was going through a whole faith, a whole different kind of way. But, thank God I— He— I was prepared for the whole situation. And, ahh, so then afterwards I was going to the other health group, but it was a little out of the way and everything else. And it was a little bit boring. It was a beautiful area, but there— from there I started going to Housing Works. Then, my ex-husband joined with me, and, ahh, and from there it just went on to moving. You know, we had trans group there— ahh— from there I started going to the one on 43rd Street. But I had already started going to the one on— ahh— The Gay Men's Health Crisis had a trans group on 28th Street that had been going on for— before— for several years now. But my niece, Beverly, Beverly [inaudible]— we had been going to it on and off for quite a while. You know, but those groups, that's supposed— those groups weren't steady. You know? Those groups weren't steady, and she would inform me: "Vivian, they are having a group 'here'" or "Vivian, they are having a group 'there.'" But they weren't really reliable because they would break up and then whatnot. So, you know, there weren't really all that reliable. But the ones at Housing Works were always reliable. And, I would find out about the groups on 33rd Street from [Moche?], but they were always there on point. You know? That's how I managed to know Moche, and that's how I managed to know Sylvia. And that's all found through Housing Works, and Moche. And now I hear that Housing Works and Moche are connected. And I— that's how I met Brooke, and that's how I met a lot of the girls— ahh— a lot of the girls that are very active and very, very— Who I tell sometimes: "If you're giving up a ton, you don't give up, girl, take a break!" It's not easy. Sometimes you just feel like you're disappointed— don't— it's not easy, and— you know, I know the feeling. "You just take a break. Take a little break or take a little breather and go back again." It's, like, it isn't easy. It's— you're not gonna see people accept it 100 percent. You know? People not gonna be accepting 100 percent, you're not gonna reach that hundred percent level. You want to reach that hundred percent level. You're not gonna reach that hundred percent level. You know? You can try, but you're not gonna reach that hundred percent level, I've noticed. You know? You can just do what you can and— you know— but you're gonna have to take care of yourself also, because you're gonna wear yourself out. You know? It's— I mean— you have to care—you wanna care—but, you know what? You have to care about yourself, too. Because if you don't try caring for yourself, and you know what? You're gonna wear yourself out caring for somebody who's not— you know what— who's very— who's being slow in what they're thinking about. You have to give them a chance to study and analyze the process first. You know? Because they might not be thinking of it just right away; it will take them a little while before they notice that the situation is not the same anymore, before they get it. Because you tell them something and you know what? They may not pay you no mind, and then all of a sudden, they realize that what you told them is— you know— is something that that has to be noticed.

Niculescu: Yeah. I mean, so, through Housing Works and going through the groups you start to become, like a— umm— an HIV spokesperson, you said. Right? Umm, and so what did that kind of work entail, or what were you doing with that?
Ponce: Well, Speaking out. Telling your life— telling everybody that it's— you know— it's all right to be HIV. That, you know what? You can still live with the virus. Lead a normal life - lead a healthy life - if you just take the medication on time, you know? Just be careful and you can still lead a healthy life. Take the— try to have a diet. You can have a purpose, you know? You can have a job! You can have a normal life. You're still a human being. You don't have to be changing your place, you don't have to be— you know what? You can still have a normal life. You can still have kids. You can still— you are a human being! Still people out there who don't see that. Just about a week ago I was talking to a lady, and she tells me: "Oh, I'm trying to get a room." She was trying to get a room for someone. And she said: "Oh, and then we found it! Oh, but I'm worried because there's somebody down the— down the door that has AIDS!" I'm afraid that he's gonna use the towel!" I said: "What are you talking about? You don't get AIDS anymore— you don't get AIDS from the dirty towel or something like that! You don't get AIDS from a towel or nothing like that." I told my boss. He says: "I was— you know— don't tell— my boss tell me: "Don't you dare tell her that you have HIV - don't you dare tell her!" This is a person that I— I interviewed, and I told my boss to hire her! I studied this woman. I analyzed her because we needed someone else in case I needed to take off or something he wanted me to find somebody. I— I was the one that got this woman— this woman doesn't speak English! She's from Ecuador. Ahh— and I— and I found this woman charming! I found this woman really very nice, you know? And I had been studying her and everything else and she wanted to get a job, you know? She lives in the area of where I work, and I found it convenient, and I thought she's a very— I— you know, I liked her! You know? But then, we're talking and we're— you know— and she's the same - or more or less the same age I am. She's a couple of months— I'm a couple of months older than she is. She's a little bit shorter than I am, but it doesn't matter when the— you know— but she doesn't speak very good English! That's a little bit of a— but I didn't care, you know? I don't— you know, I'm not being— and she's a very good worker. But I told my boss— uhh— you know— she— she lives in the area and she's very good. She works very hard. And he says: "Okay, tell her that— you know— what days can she work, and 'this and this' and what day you can work." And, okay, he made up a schedule and he gave her the job. You know? 'Cause I— basically I was the one that got her. And she— I find out that she's being prejudiced about HIV— you know? This is knowledge that I didn't really exactly— it's putting me "what did I do?" You know? I can't be totally honest. I feel like "Wow! I just got us a woman whose being prejudiced about HIV." She seemed to be very nice with everything else, but— you know? If she knows that she has somebody working— she's working with somebody HIV, how is she gonna react? If she just mentioned that she's afraid to have her boyfriend, who she's ment— she has her ex-husband living with her and she's got another husband on the street homeless. So, I mean, she's a very caring woman. She supports her family— her family in Ecuador - she sends them money. I mean, this is why I really— she's a very caring lady! Very complex lady. So, I— I'm thinking: "Well, I don't know. This is something that I have to think about." You know? Now I have to be careful what I say, because— you know? I don't wanna be— what can I say? You know? Encounter and the, my sister-in-law is— is— thinks: "Oh!" I mean [inaudible] Oh, I'm a man trying to be in a woman's look. Really? I came out and I said it. My sister-in-law, and that's the one that's— My bro— I mean, my boyfriend is up in arms "Oh! Oh, Lord, oh no!" He wants her to go over there and they don't— you know. I went to the house once, to over there, and they had a— they had a fit because I sat on the couch! Yeah! I never had that in my— in my— even in my family! I— I was crying— my— my boyfriend doesn't wanna go to the house. He
doesn't wanna go over there. So, I said: "Listen, I don't care. That happened, it happened. But we're gonna— that's your family. Okay? Go see them. That's important. Your family is your family. I love you, don't worry about that. Fuck that. They're your family, go see them. Okay? Go see your father; go see your niece. I don't know what kind of— how your niece is gonna be brought up but, you know what? Go see your father; go see your niece." Oh, he loves his niece, you know? "Go see your family! That's important. Don't think of that. I put it behind me." I still think: "Ahh, they're kind of—" She gonna— she wants to be a health aide. [scoffs] I said: "Really? You gonna be—" She gonna be a health aide with that kind of mental ca— mental situation? What kind of men— how— [stammers]— what kind of patients she's gonna have? With that kind of mentality? I don't think she should be in a health aide position. — But who am I— you know— to say—to think anything like that? You know? I'm just a mere— what? Sixty-six-year person who— ahh— [truck horn] am here, and experienced. What have I experienced? Nothing? Gone through what? Nothing? I had a guy stick a— a— a fork— an icepick in my— and pull my jacket over my head and drive me all the way to I-don't-know-where— up into Washington Heights— all the way I don't know where— late at night, 'cause I was in the streets trying to make some money. It was cold out. Me and my roommate didn't have any money— it was a— I was at work. We went— the bars were closed, and we were out of work - me and my roommate. This was the time when we got locked out. We had to have food and— whatever. We got locked out— we had to have food— it was the holidays, and I'm out in the street trying to make a couple of— food money. What do I do? I get some guy that takes my coat, put it up— and into the car. He takes my coat up to [Cell phone goes off] where I don't see nothing. I get in. Next thing I know he talks me— I said "Oh, my God, this is all I need." All I know I had my eyes— my jacket up to my face, and I could see the little lights. It was dark— little— just ahh— you know how you can see the— New Jersey, or whatever it is? From the West Side? The car driving, whatever, I thought we were— I think it was New Jersey, I'm not sure. I said: "Oh, my God, this guy's gonna drive to whatever, he's gonna kill me and dump in the sewer!" That's all I thought. Ahh, thank God I was— I don't know what— did he rape me or something? I don't know he did something. And then he brought me back and left me in Harlem somewhere. So, what did I do? I managed to get— mind you, I get the courage again to pick up a ride and drive me back to where I was living on 50th Street and 10th Avenue. Scared shitless! I told the man: "Listen! Help! Please, this just happened to me." Thank God he was a young man and he understood. He drove me back— it— it was in a truck. I think he had small feet because he had a very— a fragrance on him. So, I remember clearly because he had that kind of fragrance. And, uhh, I was blessed. I got— another time, I remember, this is before, I was— I had a chiffon blouse and chiffon pants on. I was— They tore my chiffon blouse, my pants, everything else, and they left. Threw me in the piers. My blouse, my pants was shredded. They threw me in the piers and I was there— I just— I just don't remember nothing else. I just remember I was thrown there. By sheer luck, I— I'm still alive. I just don't— I don't even remember how I got home, or where I was living at that time. I just remember being— laying— lying there with my chiffon blouse— my chiffon— I think they were genie pants— black. I know it was a black outfit. And it was in shreds. Another time there was a— I was at— This was near Sally's, right off the West Side Highway - right off the Lincoln Tunnel. I was going through there; a man takes out a gun. I said: "Oh, my God! This is all I need!" I get the nerve and the courage, I take the gun out of this man, I turn it on him, and I says: "Get out of the car!" [speaking for the man in a whining voice]: "Oh! Don't steal my car! Don't steal my car!" I says: "Get out of the car and start running before I shoot you!" I don't
know where I got the strength and the courage! "I'm taking your car! I'm taking your car. And get out before I shoot you!" God! I'm telling you, that man went out of the car. I took the car— I didn't take the car, I left it where it was. I don't know how to drive. I took the gun, I walked to the little bush there because it was in a parking lot. I took the gun, and I put it next to a gate and I stuck it in the ground, and I ran! It was just, like, three blocks away from the 220. And I walked to the door, and I said: "Frankie!, 'cause that was the bouncer at the door, "Oh, thank you! Oh, Frankie! Oh!" Oh, and the bartender, I knew them— well I told him: "Oh! I need a drink! I need a drink! Oh! Oh! I need a drink, please! Oh! They just almost tried to stick me with a freaking gun, and I took it, and I stuck it—" and he says: "Why didn't you bring it to me, so I—?" and so "WHAT?!" "Why you came in to give me? I would have bought it off of you!" I said: "Oh, really? Well I stuck it in the ground and I left the car out there," I tell him, "I left his car— I took the car away from him." And I said: "Ahh! Oh, please, I need a drink of whatever-ever." They gave me a drink and tell me— They're telling me I should have brought him the gun, and he would bought it off of me. I said I wasn't thinking about buying and selling no gun [inaudible] which I didn't. And I wouldn't have, you know? A new car. It was basically a new car - a silver car. I said: "What? I don't drive." And you know what? That poor man, I feel sorry— well, really, I don't know if I feel sorry for him or not. He took out a gun on me. I don't know by the sheer grace of God, I turned that— changed— I took the gun out of this man. I don't even know if it was loaded. I'm saying, 'cause I didn't know— that's the first time I ever touched a gun. Never touched a gun. That's only one and only time I touched a gun. And now that I'm thinking about it, that's the first and only time I touched a gun. I don't even know: was it real, or not? I don't know. I can't— That's the first and only time. And I'm saying to myself: "God! I'm still here! I'm still here!" Another time, this guy raped me, like two or three times. And the funny thing is: he was my— one of my neighbors' cousin. What can I say? I have dealt with it. I consider myself a survivor. And my words for a lot of these girls: "You try to move on. Take this and try to get stronger." You know? You get stronger. Put it behind you. You get stronger. You know? You know, it happened. It happened, you know? You were trying to do something for— It happened. It wasn't something that you— It just happened. You know? You're lucky. It happened to you and you - you survive it. You know? You deal with it. Subconsciously you deal with it. It can be— It's horrific! You know what? Try putting it behind you. Because if you don't, it's just going to eat you away. And you can't move forward. You know, I look at it back now, you know? I joke about it sometimes. I'm still here. I'm still here by the blessing of God. It was no joke when it happened. It was no joke. My heart almost came out. But now I look at it and now I think about it, and my heart still goes. But you know what? I'm here now. And I say: "Thank you, God," you know, "for your guidance." But I'm here for the reason so I can be able to tell that story. So, somebody else can get stronger, get wiser, and be aware.

Niculescu: I think that might be some really beautiful advice to end the interview on. Unless there's anything else you wanted to add? [cell phone goes off] Well, thank you so much!