

*The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 digitally-recorded session of an interview with Mayzabeth Lopez by Cynthia Tobar on March 16, 2012 in New York City. This interview is part of the Welfare Rights Initiative Digital Oral History Archive Project.*

*Mayzabeth Lopez has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.*

*[starts at 0:00:00]*

*Cynthia Tobar:* Thank you for being here. Would you please state your name and your role with WRI?

*Mayzabeth Lopez:* My name is Mayzabeth better known as Ginger Lopez. I was the Coordinator for Legal Advocacy and Organizing at Welfare Rights Initiative.

*CT:* I wanted to ask you about your background, your early life and any influences that you had by your family and their education. Anything you had to say about your early childhood. You could tell me a little bit about that and you can begin anywhere you'd like.

*ML:* Okay, well I must say that my childhood, my upbringing and the things that I absorbed have had a lot to do with my activity at WRI; I grew up in a very poor family. My mom was supported by public assistance. She was pretty much a single mom and she also had other issues going on too. I grew up in a family that was pretty much drug addicted. I lived there up until I was 11 and then moved with my grandparents and aunt. At my grandmother's home, even though the situation was more stable, there was not a lot of money. I had aunts and uncles who were also supported by public assistance and I know very well the struggle of growing up on food stamps and trying to make ends meet and trying to access education as a route out of poverty.

I think that's where it all stemmed from, just my experience with poverty, me not wanting to have that lifestyle when I got older is what inspired me to go to school. My mom had actually attended the CUNY. It is now New York Technical College. I think it had another name back in the days, during the 70's. She wanted to be a social worker. She got an associate's degree and she was on her right path. But things in life happened and she was deterred from completing her education. That was a big factor to me so I was

determined to, I guess, not follow in my mom's footsteps and accomplish what I wanted, which was my education, so I wouldn't have to live the same lifestyle.

*CT:* Can you tell me a little bit more about as an observer of life in your neighborhood at the time, can you describe to me a little bit the condition of poverty while you were there. Was there any other form of support system in place that was non-government sponsored?

*ML:* I grew up in the housing projects in Brooklyn, in Williamsburg Brooklyn. I don't know what else to say but that it was a hectic experience. I never felt alone because everyone around me was going through the same situation. Everyone was poor, everyone was struggling, everyone was trying to figure out some kind of way out of the situation, well not everyone. Other than that I don't think there were any other governmental supports other than housing and public benefits.

*CT:* Can you tell me a little bit about what you did; I guess you were saying you didn't want to follow in your mother's footsteps. What were some of the first steps you took towards that?

*ML:* After I graduated from high school I enrolled in Hunter College. That was a, yeah, actually when I first enrolled at Hunter College I kind of, I did find out I was pregnant. So I was pregnant my first semester at Hunter. When I found out I was pregnant that was a bit of a downer for the rest of the family. Everyone thought like "Okay, now she's pregnant. Now she's really not going to graduate." That factor made me more determined to finish school, to complete my degree.

Yeah, I'm sorry, I lost it a minute. Yeah, so that's what made me determined to finish school. Having a son now and there was still not enough money. Now I had a bigger responsibility. I didn't really have anyone to help me. His father was not around so now I wasn't just going to school for me, I was going to school more for my son so I could secure a better future and so I could set a better example and so that he wouldn't have to grow up the way I grew up. That was a big factor for me.

*CT:* What resources did you take advantage of during your time at Hunter; I guess that first semester, to continue with your education?

*ML:* Let's see, I know I did a lot of work-study. I did an internship at WRI. I took the community leadership courses. I did some on and off campus training. When Rayvin became of the appropriate age I was able to enroll him into the Hunter Childcare Center, so that made things a lot easier for me. I was able to go to school with him and pick him up at the end of the day and also get a lot of work done. Childcare was another major factor. Without childcare I would not have been able to finish school. I mean it would have taken me a lot longer to finish.

*CT:* Were you on any government public assistance at that time?

*ML:* At that time I was still on my mom's public assistance budget. At that time, yeah, actually that's when the rules started changing. That's when I started hearing rumors about students going to college and being forced to drop out of the school to participate in a work fair program. At that time I was just like "No, that can't be true that doesn't sound right. That just doesn't seem right." And that was the case, yeah, I got a letter saying that I needed- at first, I believe, it said I needed to come in for fingerprinting. I just so happened at the same time to be involved with Welfare Rights Initiative and they were very aware of the issues. I learned a lot of "Know Your Rights" tactics and strategies and I was able to fight for my education and not risk losing the family's benefits.

*CT:* How did you hear about WRI at Hunter?

*ML:* It was entering my first semester at Hunter. I got a letter in the mail; I believe it was the official WRI orientation letter. I remember thinking, "Wow, what is this about? Sounds interesting." That's how I, yeah, I was introduced to WRI.

*CT:* What was that experience like?

*ML:* At first, I was a freshman, I was 18 years old. I came to Hunter as a nursing major, so I wasn't sure what community organizing was even though my mom had previous work in the community and was involved in Black Panther activities in her youth. It just wasn't clicking until I realized that 22,000 CUNY students were forced to drop out of school. I could have been among the 22,000. It angered me to know that there was a way for me to go to school and not everyone knew that, it made me really, I can't say angry in a way but it kind of empowered me to say "Hey, this is wrong and we must fight against it. I just felt it was unfair. It's just unfair. This is not the way I would want to live. I don't want to live on public assistance. I don't want to depend on anything. I want to be self-

sufficient and I want to go to school. I just felt it was just wrong and that's what made me determined to fight for myself and for others.

*CT:* Can you describe to me then your experience after that letter, what was going through your mind?

*ML:* I didn't really know. When I got the letter I really did not know what it was about. All I knew was that it said something about Welfare Rights Initiative. It was when I came to the orientation that I understood what it was about. I started my work with WRI through work-study then I enrolled in the third community leadership course. Everyone started sharing their stories. It seemed like no one was shameful. Everyone came out in the open. At that time I felt like wow I'm really not the only person here on public assistance. I'm not the only poor student at Hunter who is striving to get an education. There are others like me who are in the same situation who are poor and know the value of education and how they so desperately need it to move on.

*CT:* Can you tell me about the other people in that class? Around what year was that?

*ML:* I think it was 1998 or '99. It was so long ago I'm not sure. I remember [Odena Nelson]; she was my cohort. I've been with WRI so long; I've bonded with a lot of the classes. When I was in my own class, I don't know what it was maybe because I was busy doing other things but I kind of, it was so long ago. There were so many classes. It was at WRI for nearly ten years. I remember Odena in my class and I remember a lot of other student leaders from different cohorts.

*CT:* What did you think of the instructors of the course, Linda?

*ML:* They were very inspiring. I believe it was because of the professors and my work at WRI that kind of lead me to change my major from nursing to political science. I was definitely active and it became evident "This is what I need to do." Once I started telling my story I couldn't stop telling my story. I just wanted everyone to hear it so everyone could know the experience and everyone could know what's the reality, what's really going on here in New York City regarding HRA policy and access to education and training.

*CT:* After that class you decided to get more involved in WRI, the first class--

- ML:* I started as a work-study student; I then took the community leadership seminar, then my internship. Then I was hired as the staff associate for legal advocacy and then there was a coordinator position available and then that's when I started coordinating the legal advocacy and organizing program in collaboration with CUNY law school's justice project.
- CT:* Can you tell me a little bit more about that?
- ML:* Wow, WRI, it was a legal advocacy and organizing project so the idea, WRI's mission was to teach students about their rights to remain in school, about their rights to access higher education at the same time giving the space to voice, to tell their story so that they could influence other policy makers, people who are actually making the decisions in Albany. At WRI we felt that who better to tell of the experiences than people who were actually experiencing these issues themselves. That's was what I did at WRI, organizing students, letting them know what their rights are and if you're sick and tired of the system, then this is what we can do to change it. We need to write letters. We need to go to Albany. We need to lobby. We need to rally. We need to have a lot of dialogue and yeah, pretty much empowering students that are in the same situation, let them know that they have rights and they have voices and they should be at the table influencing policy making decisions.
- CT:* During all of this time with all of this fantastic activity, what are your reflections of the people that you were meeting along the way and the people you were working with?
- ML:* I must say to this day the people that I met at WRI, at Hunter and all of my community work; they hold a special place in my heart. I still believe to this day they are the smartest, the most intellectual people I've ever met. They are incredibly smart. Not too many people get the issues. WRI is a leading organization and I was proud to be affiliated. WRI gets it. They're truly a grassroots organization.
- CT:* Can you describe what your vision of leadership was before becoming involved in WRI and how that vision and your role within that vision of leadership has changed since then?
- ML:* Before WRI I could say I had a real sense of what leadership was suppose to mean. If you asked me before WRI to say what's leadership? I would probably think it was just someone just leading something. Someone taking control, someone pushing people in a

certain direction, that's probably what I would have thought about leadership. After WRI leadership became a very different thing to me. It was more about bringing people to another level, kind of mentoring people in a way to let them know they have the ability to take action, to move things, to shake things. Leadership is moving people from one place to another and that's what I learned at WRI. I learned the meaning of leadership concretely when we were able to get past, the work-study and internship law. I remember when we were at the table with other organizers, and lawyers and just talking about what we would like to see differently. What changes could we see that would make a big difference for students receiving public assistance and their rights to access education?

We were just brainstorming and it took a couple of years. I mean all I remember is it went from that conversation to the table to us actually having legislation written and meeting with many senators and assembly men, letter writing. And the next thing you know it became an actual law, the law was passed unanimously. We began telling students "This is a law now. You can go to school. You can count internships. You can count work-study. You don't have to leave school. This is now a state stature. This is what we did. Your voices were heard and this is what we were able to do." That was really powerful for me.

*CT:* Had you ever had an experience quite as powerful before Hunter, before that with your family or even with yourself? Did you ever get involved with any political activity or activism beforehand?

*ML:* Not with WRI, after WRI yeah. I became extremely politically active. Before WRI, no not really; I was a nursing major. I was looking into media studies. I wanted to be a radio broadcaster. WRI definitely changed my train of thought

*CT:* Tell me, if you could describe for me a little bit that time period and what follows your own moral development as a person and your decision about how to live your life. It seems like WRI was a life changing force. In what way during that time did you see this change in your own personal life as well as what was going on around you?

*ML:* It could have been when I left WRI, when I got my very first full, full-time job. I guess what I call "WRI thinking" I was able to think about particular issues in a different way. After WRI I began work at St. Nicholas Preservation Cooperation as a housing specialist. I think what WRI taught me to look into issues in a

different way. For instance, like okay here I'm in my community that I grew up in and I'm advocating for housing rights but what is really going on is the people in my neighborhood are being pushed out because the rents are going high. It just forced me to think about things differently and I started wondering why these things are happening. Why are my people being pushed out? Why can they no longer afford the rent? Why are they being pushed out to other neighborhoods? And every other issue, criminal justice issues—it's made me think about things in a very different way.

*CT:* How long were you at WRI then?

*ML:* I took about two and a half years off of Hunter, a lot of it was because the work at WRI was really intense and I guess I was shown the model of pursuing an ongoing education. At that point my work at WRI was so important I kind of did put my studies off just to continue the work, to get the work-study and internship law passed and get letters written to go to Albany. I did put it off but I did finally graduate. It was a lot of work. I had a great experience.

*CT:* Can you describe to me the period after WRI?

*ML:* After WRI, they trained me to speak; I did a lot of public speaking, a lot of testimonies at New York City Council. I've been up to Washington. I'm sorry; I'm losing it here. I'm getting a little nervous.

*CT:* It's okay, take a good breather and we can pause at anytime if you need a break. Do you need a break?

*ML:* No, I just have an anxiety issues. I get really nervous sometimes. I'm sorry.

*CT:* No worries, no worries, it's all about you being comfortable and if you're uncomfortable we can stop at any time. Would you like us to stop?

*ML:* No, it's fine we can continue.

*CT:* Okay, what's your attitude toward the conservative right or what was it before and after WRI?

*ML:* Okay, yeah, I must say that WRI taught me to look at conservatism in a whole different way. For instance, I'll use this example, we had a, there was senator [Ray Meier] who was a very, very conservative republican. I believe from Utica, upstate New York

and when we were talking to him about the work-study and internship bill and how necessary it was and we brought him over to Hunter so he could see how hard students were working to graduate from school. He said a lot of things like “When I was in school I worked two jobs. I used to scrub toilets. I did this. I used to bag groceries.” In essence he was saying, “Why can’t you all do the same thing? If I worked two jobs, why can’t you work two jobs?” And so at first I would think why would I even consider having a dialogue with someone who does not come from my world or understand my issues? Why would I even talk to these people? They don’t think the way we’re thinking, they’re not on our side. They’re just bad. They’re just evil, evil people. I dislike them. I hate them. I don’t want anything to do with them.

But when we actually met Senator Ray Meier and he came to Hunter and we established a relationship and we became friends and he acknowledged the work that was being done, and he had a turn around. I guess there were things that he didn’t see in a certain way that the students at WRI were able to help him see work activities in a different way and he made a turn around. He supported the bill. With his help—I think without Ray Meier it would have been very difficult to get the bill passed. It became law and it was republican, it was a very conservative republican at the time that who did it. Yeah, that definitely changed my views about conservatives. I don’t believe in a lot of direct action. I really do believe in dialogue and there’s way where people can come together and at least come to consensus a particular point. I can’t say that I terribly hate conservatives; I think we have a different way of thinking and we just have to talk. We need to talk and we need to have more dialogue, find some common ground.

*CT:* Let’s go back to your job with St. Nicholas, do I have it right? St. Nicholas Housing Cooperation?

*ML:* Yeah, I think they have a different name now. I think they are St. Nick’s Alliance. At that time it was St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Cooperation.

*CT:* How long were you there for?

*ML:* I was there for two, two and a half years; about two and half years and at that time it was interesting because I was working with a lot of seniors in Greenpoint Brooklyn and a lot of the seniors in Greenpoint did not have access to many resources. I did a lot of home visits and I did a lot of work after work hours. There was stuff that I wanted to do that I could not do at St. Nick’s that we



didn't have the capabilities of doing and I wanted to do so much more for the clients and we just couldn't. It just so happened that I came across Article 81 training and I had never heard of anything like that.

Basically it was a certification to become the guardian of people who are mentally incapacitated and with that you pretty much have the right to advocate and make decisions that are in the best interest of your client. Within the legal powers of a guardianship I was actually able to go into housing court and argue against the plaintiff's attorney and I vacated lot of evictions. It became clear to me then that I could not have been doing that without my Article 81 guardianship certificate and training. I think that's probably why I am applying to law school right now, I'm really trying. I'm taking the LSAT in June and I've been studying—I can't believe what I'm doing right now but I'm doing it for a reason. Because in a way I do feel that direct service is needed to help people get to another level.

You can't really organize active if you're still being affected by economic issues and you feel like your being held down. I am interested helping people address their immediate needs so that they're able to see things a different way so that they have time to actually organize, activate and make bigger changes. In that time I got another job offer so I moved over to the New York Foundation for Guardian Services. I thought I was happy. I thought I was like "Yeah, this is great." And it was the exact opposite of what I had been looking for. It was a totally different environment; everything that they believed in went against all of my principals.

I thought that I was doing things to better the lives of my people but I was in a whole different place. I didn't understand why the things that were happening in the agency were happening like for instance they would want me to not stop evictions. They would get angry at me if I did an order to show cause and a lot of the times it was because it was a money incentive. They were in charge of the money; it was just a really awful situation. I know there were plenty of council members calling the office all of the time, senators, assemblymen wanting to check on certain clients. I just felt like I was on the other side of the fence. I'm like "How did I get here? How did this happen?" I tried to stick with it, I thought that maybe if I model, which is what I learned at WRI, through modeling if I do things in a certain way than maybe people will follow. I continued to try to advocate for clients but it was just, that wasn't their interest to do that. It was more of placing people in nursing homes or finding other adult facilities.

I just didn't understand why this was happening when there are so many resources out there to help people and it just wasn't necessary. That's when I received the wonderful opportunity to the work with the Bronx Defenders and I was like "Oh wow, there are still good people. There are real good people that actually care about the issues and that's when I became really active in criminal justice issues. I kind of reunited with some of my friends from Hunter. At Hunter on the other side when I was working with WRI, I was also involved in other kinds of things. I had a good friend, George Martinez, who was my political science professor at Hunter and we did a lot of organizing activities. The Global Block Foundation, which was founded by George Martinez, uses hip-hop to discuss police relations internationally. I have also done work with many other progressives; [Gustavo Rivera], also one of my Political Science professors, who is active on criminal justice issues. It's all kind of coming full circle for me right now.

Over the last, I'd say seven years, I thought—I delayed law school because I wasn't sure if that's what I wanted to do. I said maybe it could be social work or maybe I just want to be more politically active. Maybe I should make a run and I actually did make a run for the county committee a few years ago. It was a nightmare. I live in [Vito Lopez's] district. It was a nightmare, however I am still active in a current campaign. It's the "Bum Rush the Vote 2010" one of my good friends, George Martinez, is running again as one of the official occupy candidates. I just with what I went through during the last campaign, I worked on two campaigns. I also worked on Kevin [Powell's] campaign and I was kind of targeted in my neighborhood. I live in a development in a lot of buildings.

I don't know, I do—it's not that it deterred me from politics but I feel like I don't have the right to say the things I want to say with just a bachelors degree. So I'm applying to law school, that's what I want to do. I don't know if I would be practicing law for a very long time but I definitely want to at least have the right to say what I want to say without people thinking twice.

*CT:* This value in education is coming back, coming back full circle with WRI and the tools they were able to give you, you think, can you say a little bit about that, the importance of education seems that's also something that you're [talking about].

*ML:* Yeah, I mean, it goes back full circle. Without an education, without a real education you're not able to really sustain a good

job. With my bachelors degree I was able to sustain a full time job and the pay was okay, it was fine but at the same time I kind of felt limited in a way. There are still so many other things, there are a lot of things I'd like to work on but I still don't have enough education or I feel I don't have enough education. I don't feel secure enough with my education to venture out in those things. I really, because of WRI, I really do believe that education should be something lifelong. Yeah, here I am again knowing that I want to go back to school, this is what I need to do and without an education, had I not gone to Hunter, had I not gotten a bachelors degree I probably would have been working a miserable nine to five right now, not doing the things I want to do or not engaged in activities that I want to be engaged in. And here I am again; I want to engage more so I want to go back to school. And I'm also trying to set another example for my son so he knows that education is ongoing. It doesn't stop. You can keep going and there is so much more to learn. There is so much more to do.

*CT:* All of your activism, your advocacy work, how have you seen it be reabsorbed or what the reaction has been from your family, not only your son but your other family members and your friends in your community?

*ML:* It's funny that you say that. I mentioned before, I grew up in a housing project in Brooklyn. Over the last couple of years I've kind of—my grandma still lives there and my mom still lives there so I'm there a lot and so I'm still in contact with the people in the community. Over the years I guess they've kind of seen me as the local social worker or activist so when anything goes on they're like "Oh, where is Ginger?" They're knocking on my grandmother's door asking for my phone number or they're wanting to ask me questions about their public benefits or about a training program or so and so got stopped by the police here.

In a way I tell them, I try to empower my people, the people I grew up, the people I went to grammar school with. We kind took different directions. I kept going to school and some decided not to go to school for whatever reason it was, couldn't get out of what they were going through. I hope that I am a source of inspiration, just seeing me there every day and knowing that it's possible, that if I can do it they can do it just the same. My grandma tells me all the time that they ask questions and they talk about me all the time. That makes me feel good even though I don't know if I am really affecting the people, I don't know for sure but I guess I have a feeling that that's happening.

*CT:* The direct affect on your son, you're modeling for him too, right?

*ML:* Yeah, sometimes I think I'm not doing enough but when I speak to—I had a recent parent teacher conference and the teachers tell me “Your son is so incredibly smart. He knows about all these issues. He wrote this essay about this and he wrote this essay about that and I'm like “Wow, he's really getting it.” He doesn't express it to me all the time. Sometimes or I'll listen to an online radio show, I'll play it extra loud just so that he can get some of it. Even though he pretends, I think, he's not listening. He's absorbing it. I'm hoping that one of these days in the near future he will have some kind of explosion and just get ready to tackle whatever issues are affecting him and contribute to his community. He's around me all the time. He's done a lot of outreach. He's flyer'd . He's been to a lot of campaigns. He's involved. I try to get him involved. I try to put him in that space where he knows what is going on.

*CT:* What are your thoughts on activism now versus activism when you started in regards to OWS and what WRI was advocating for?

*ML:* I'm kind of; it's funny that you asked me that because I'm really trying to figure out where I'm at right now. At WRI, I was always trained—direct actions are necessary I think, could be helpful when they're absolutely necessary in my opinion from what I learned at WRI when we got legislation passed, like the work-study intern law, it wasn't through direct action. We weren't hollering and screaming at someone's office or calling them names. That wasn't our strategy, our strategy was through dialogue and more see and prove; this is what is going on see for yourself, hear the stories. It was more of dialogue and we established better relationships that way, I am sure. I believe what is going on now and I'm definitely in support of the occupy movement—and this is all kind of personal, I just, I think there are times when direct actions are needed. But I think they could kind of bite you in the butt in a way.

I'm just not a big fan of that. I'm in support of the issues they are representing, being that all of the things that we've wanted to hear and finally there is a group actually saying these things and they're not afraid. They're out there, they're doing it. Maybe I'm just a little bit more traditional. I don't know if it was my WRI training, the things that I saw there, the accomplishments that we made. Right now what I'm seeing with the occupy movement there is direct actions going on almost every two, three days a week. There are things happening but at the same time there are laws, there's legislation being passed to

prevent protestors from protesting on state property. I don't know I'm interested more in dialogue, more personal interaction. I'm really not a fan of getting on the bad side of people to get them to see the good. I don't think that strategy works. It may at sometimes but I don't think it's a very effective strategy. That's just my personal thought; I think that's probably why I'm limitedly involved in this campaign.

My friend George Martinez's campaign, it's a whole different strategy. Right now he has the occupy movement. They have his back. The campaign two years ago was more traditional. We were out there, engaging with the community to other people. I've been to a couple of rallies, Occupy to stop foreclosure actions. I don't know, I think it's good to start the conversation going but I don't know. I don't know. I'm here; let's see what happens. I'm sorry to sound so negative.

*CT:* Not at all, what is your ideology at the end of the day taught you about an equal and just society and what that would be like, what would be your vision of that?

*ML:* Could you repeat that?

*CT:* If you have an ideology of what an equal and just society is, what would that be?

*ML:* I wrote a paper about this a couple of years ago.

*CT:* Oh, awesome.

*ML:* Wow, okay, okay, I know this may sound a little, this is just a really, really utopian but I guess my ideal society would be one where all of the human basic needs are not something that you have to pay for. Everyone would have a right to free housing. Everyone would have a right to free education. Everyone would have the right to live wherever they want to live, wear whatever they want to wear. There wouldn't be any limitations; there would be a whole lot of things that would have to be in place. I don't believe in separation of anybody or for anything for any reason. I think for my society to establish equality and justice our basic needs would have to be absolutely free. That's where I would start at. I don't know if that will ever happen but in my little utopian society everything would be free. You'd be able to set up a tent wherever you wanted to and call it ours. That's how it would be.

*CT:* At the end of the day how would you characterize the impact that WRI has had on your work, on your life, on your outlook?

*ML:* I definitely, WRI definitely taught me how to view my own experiences and kind of, I guess identify my strengths and use it to motivate others to pursue their passions. Yeah, I'm sorry, yeah. I talk about WRI everywhere I go. There's this unique group of women who have been through it all and they're still the smartest people on the face of the earth that I know and they're doing it. They're grassroots and they're still there and they pass legislation. Our voices are being heard. I guess WRI also taught me that there's, no matter where you have been placed in this life, whether you've come from a really poor economic family that doesn't matter, you do have rights and you can continue to do what you want to do. Dreams do come true. You just have to be there and stay focused and be in the moment. I guess own what's yours, own your space.

*CT:* Any final thoughts before we end?

*ML:* It was nice seeing you again. I really feel privileged to have been a part of WRI and to know the women at WRI. They've taught me so much, life long lessons that I will take with me everywhere, everywhere I go. Wherever I end up I will always use the WRI model. I feel truly blessed —they truly, truly are a unique organization.

*CT:* Thank you so much.

*[End of Audio – 0:38:54]*