

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Gabriel Valencia

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<http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/gabriel-valencia-spanish>

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**Mónica Cordero Sancho:** This is Monica Cordero for the Coney Island History Project, and today, we're speaking with Gabriel Valencia in Spanish.

**Gabriel Valencia:** My name is Gabriel Valencia. I'm 49 years old. And here in the U.S., I've been in Brooklyn for 20 years.

**MCS:** Where do you work, Gaby?

**GB:** Here in Coney Island in a restaurant called Paul's Daughter.

**MCS:** What was your first impression upon arriving in New York?

**GV:** Well, when I arrived my first impression, on the first day that I arrived, there was snow. So much snow, that to go into the city, I didn't know if I could even walk. This was my first impression. I had never seen, well, in truth, I had never seen snow. I walked around and there was nobody, I was completely alone. This was my impression of the snow.

**MCS:** When did you come? How old were you?

**GV:** When I came I was 18 years old. This was in 1988.

**MCS:** Was it December or January?

**GV:** No it was...February.

**MCS:** February. What was the first place where you stayed in New York, where was it?

**GV:** The first place I lived was here in Brooklyn, in Coney Island, on West 19th. The first time.

**MCS:** Why was it that you decided to come to the U.S., to make a life in the U.S.?

**GV:** Well, I didn't decide to come. I just had a brother here and he suggested coming. And I said yes. But he said that here, people didn't speak Spanish. And I said it doesn't

matter, I have to come. So when I arrived here, it was true that people didn't speak Spanish. I found that only one in 100 people spoke Spanish. It was very difficult, but I didn't have any other option. From there I had to learn the language little by little to survive, to get ahead.

**MCS:** How was it that you learned the language, and what advantages does it give you to be bilingual?

**GV:** I learned, supposedly, at work, little by little. People who worked with me would teach me, this is how you say this and that, you pronounce it like this. Even later, one day—I don't know what year, but about 15 years ago—I decided to go to school for three months to learn a little bit, to talk, but also to write, just in case one day I wanted to work as a waiter. But since I don't practice writing, I've forgotten everything. I only know how to speak it, but I forgot how to write, I only write in Spanish.

**MCS:** What advantage do you have living in both an English-speaking world and a Spanish-speaking world?

**GV:** Well, it is very important because many people come from Hispanic, Latin countries that speak Spanish and since they come on vacation they don't know. When I go to work and they ask me, do you speak Spanish? I say yes, perfect Spanish. You tell me what you want and I'll be happy to take care of it. And they say how good it is, they say, because there are people—we're staying in the city—and there are people who speak Spanish to each other, but when you talk to them, they say they don't speak Spanish. It's not like that's always the case, but I'm not like that. It's the advantage that I speak Spanish and I speak English so I can communicate with people. Even the Hispanics, when they come on vacation they feel very happy, content, because it's good to find a person who is charismatic and speaks Spanish. My first language is Spanish, and my second is English.

**MCS:** What did you do in Mexico? Where did you live in Mexico? What do you remember about your life in Mexico?

**GV:** Well, in Mexico we usually lived outside the city, in the provinces, and worked in the fields planting vegetables and flowers.

**MCS:** Where did you come from, what part of Mexico?

**GV:** From Puebla.

**MCS:** How was the Puebla which you do remember and which perhaps sometimes makes you nostalgic?

**GV:** When I was there, there were a lot of small buildings and people were pretty low-key. Now everything is different. New companies have come in. When I lived there, there weren't any expensive car companies. But now, the last time I went to Mexico, especially Puebla, I saw a lot of cars. For example Mercedes Benz, Audi, very expensive cars and people buy them. I don't know where this money comes from, but people buy them. They live well. Well, a lot has changed there. There are a lot of homes that are private, only the people who live there can enter and those who don't can't.

**MCS:** Is there anything that makes you nostalgic for your country?

**GV:** Well no because, really, most of my childhood—I grew up here because I arrived when I was 17 years old and started working when I was 18.

**MCS:** [00:10:43] So do you consider Coney Island as the place where you belong?

**GV:** Well in reality yes because my family is here. Many people even say to me, where are you from? And I say I'm from Mexico, but they say you're not Mexican anymore, you're from here. And I ask why, if I speak Spanish and everything? They say yes, but you've spent most of your life here. If you think about when you arrived to how old you are now, you've now lived here longer than you lived in Mexico.

**MCS:** Do you remember what your first job was? And what's the feeling you have of your first job here in the United States?

**GV:** My first job was working in a pizzeria. For about a month, because I arrived in winter. And in the kitchen there were so many dishes that when I looked at it I said wow, I have to do all that? The owner said yes. At first I wanted to run and when I started washing the dishes, which I had to do half the time, I wanted to cry and said I'm going, I don't want to be here. But I had no choice. Before, my brother had told me that's the way life is here, I told you, it's not like when you're at home. When you're in Mexico, you go to work, you work eight hours, you go home, you have time to go play soccer or hang out with your friends, talking, conversing. Not here. Here it's different. Usually the boss would give me twelve hours, six days. And they didn't even pay me the minimum wage, but I don't know what happened, because later, about a month later they closed the pizzeria and told me they'd call me but they never did. That's when my brother, where he worked—even his boss's friends would eat there—my brother said, I have a brother, he just arrived from Mexico. He doesn't know how to speak the language, but he's looking for work. Then his boss and his friends told him sure, fine, tell him to come in March. But he doesn't know the language...but they said don't worry, I'll show him what to do in the kitchen. Cook, put out the sodas, beer, clean outside, clean the tables

and so little by little he'll learn. I started to work in my second job with Gregory and Paul's and now I'm with Paul's daughter, which is Paul's Daughter's restaurant.

**MCS:** So, in short, what was your first impression of working with Gregory and Paul?

**GV:** My first impression was, I arrived, they told me to come in, they taught me how to cook. And it was so hot. I was like wow, I was surprised, like wow I'm going to have to do all that. That was, I was astonished, because I had to cook this, go here, there, and I was like, where have I come. That was the impression I had, like wow, but I had no choice because I wanted to come here and I was already facing the consequences. And from there, that's why I set out to learn the language, to improve, because after the kitchen I started working out in front. I started there and I kept getting better, little by little.

**MCS:** And who are we talking about, Paul or Gregory?

**GV:** Well, both, because the business was Paul and Gregory. I worked from one business to the other. One was here on West 10th and the other one was there on the boardwalk and they sent me from one to the other. Always back and forth. I worked with both of them.

**MCS:** What was the difference? How do you remember them, what do you remember about each of them?

**GV:** Well, the difference is that Gregory was a person who was very strict in the business. Super strict. And not Paul. Paul was a person who was very charismatic, always expressing himself to people, to employees. He knew how to talk. Gregory was different because he was very strict and taught you things quickly and sometimes he got upset. He even made an example of me, telling people, you know English, you speak English well, why can't you learn? Look at him. He's from Mexico, he's been here for a year and look, he doesn't speak, but he understands. So what's wrong with you guys? Why do you understand English and can't even do things like math, why can't you do the math? Because ... lots of people, when they get a job, they are in high school. And you don't know how to do the math? How are you in high school and you don't know how to do math? Because before, they used the old machines [cash registers] that had from a penny to a dollar. To put in 50 dollars I had to punch the dollar 50 times. And sometimes on the menu to do the math—well, usually I used my brain because well, I was used to doing the math. But the people who at that time had cell phones or calculators especially—they started to circulate—I didn't use that. You had to do it in your brain, he said, all the checks for \$40 or \$50. Sometimes I had to charge up to \$150 and only in my head. What did they eat? I kept tallying checks quickly and it wasn't too bad. They'd say, do you remember? Yes, I remember everything. On the other hand, a

couple people had a calculator and he told them no. Calculators here are no good, here you have to be fast, faster than the calculator. And it was true because sometimes they got confused, sometimes they didn't remember what they gave me and then they would say why did you overcharge me if I didn't eat that?

**MCS:** This was Gregory?

**GV:** This was Gregory.

**MCS:** And how was it with Paul?

**GV:** Paul was different because he spoke the language well, English. He would say OK if you can't do the math, take a notebook and you write it down and then add it up. But I want you to do it well and not be stressed out. The difference is that he was very kind.

**MCS:** What is the difference between the two restaurants?

**GV:** Well, there was no difference because they both sold the same food. They had their two names as partners. Where I was with Gregory, most of the people who worked there were men, more than women. Because sometimes the women couldn't stand the heat. Too much heat. It was so hot because it's not high, because it's here on west 10 and the ceiling is not high, it was super low. I would just keep drinking water, I didn't feel like eating anything, I was always moving. When the summer was over, it looked like I was in a sauna. Not there with Paul, the difference was that there were girls working ... that is, it was very different. Remember that there on the beach, you can usually feel the fresh air from the beach and it's comfortable, wow. When I, the first time I went to work there and was there all day, I was like wow, it was like I went from hell to paradise. It was beautiful, looking at the beach, the ocean, I was like wow ... I mean it's very beautiful, that captivated me. I was so impressed, like look at that, wow! That's why people like to come here. They like to sit, look out. I'd imagine people forget everything, stress, if they're angry, they let it all go. It's a great view, very nice. Better than other beaches here in the United States because the sand is right next to the water. I went to Atlantic City and when I arrived and I said ... I call it "parquet" but I don't know how you say it, they usually call it "malecón" [boardwalk] as well. I don't know if that's the right word. But I went to Atlantic City and I was like, where is the beach? And the beach is so far away that you couldn't see it. I could only see sand dunes. That's why people say there's no place like Coney Island. Coney Island is Coney Island and it always will be. It's historical, Coney Island. For what has happened here. And now, especially, it's been reborn because of how it's changed. The attractions of the amusement park. Everything is new. You feel better, you feel at ease with your family, you come to be together. Everything has changed, it's very different. Even I myself feel calm, I feel good, without problems...Everything has changed for the better.

**MCS:** Tell me, how is the menu they had when you came different to the menu now? Has it changed?

**GV:** A little. For example, before there were only hot dogs, French fries, Italian sausage, beer. That has changed. Now, well there's only one restaurant, the other one doesn't exist anymore. But the one that used to belong to Paul, who now gave it to his daughter, has changed because now they sell the beer that's from here, what's it called?...craft beer. The craft beer has changed. Before there were other kinds of beer, but everything has changed little by little. People today like that beer. Most of the craft beer didn't exist before. Only the famous ones that are from here, from the United States and other countries. Also on the menu now they sell lobster rolls. Other things that I don't remember...but before they sold corn on the cob, then they took that off. They also used to sell shish-kebabs but they took them off, too.

**MCS:** What were those?

**GV:** Shish-kebabs are the ones that come on sticks and you cook them on the grill. They come with meat. You can make a sandwich out of them. It can be all pork or they put a piece of onion and a piece of meat and a piece of bell pepper. I know them as "alambres" or "sticks". That's what they took off the menu. I don't know why, and they took the corn off as well, which people still ask about a lot. They call it corn on the cob. But the shish kebabs, they took them away. Other than that, very little on the menu has changed. Now there are others...they sell, for example...Oh there was also something that they called Jamaican meat patties that are like empanadas with meat inside, a little spicy. They also discontinued them. They don't exist anymore. And they put on the artisanal beer. Also some onion rings, fried clams, which are sold with potatoes a lot. That's what has changed, like three or four things.

**MCS:** When did Gregory's close, when did you start—what year did you start with Paul and what were the different jobs you had with him?

**GV:** Gregory's closed about 14 years ago. After that, Paul had his for about two years. Paul decided to give it to his daughter and so today it's Paul's Daughter. So I started working with him making the pizzas and taking care of the customers. After that, I moved on to the fryers, then to selling the sausages, then to the hot dogs and from there even to opening the clams. I'm slow because...I have experience, but I'm not fast, because if I don't practice it. Everything else I can do very quickly. Only the clams, I can open them. Paul taught me, he said look...in case of an emergency that the clam person doesn't come, the clam man, you know how to open them and he taught me how to open them. I can open them. Not so fast because I'm hardly in that section. There are people who know the clams. They even brought in oysters three years ago, too, which I forgot about. I also know how to open them, but slowly, not quickly, like the people who

are doing it every day. So from there, it's really everything, including working in the bar. I go all over, and I know how to do all the sections. If someone is absent, they send me to do the job of that person. Why? Because I do it all. That's how I started with Paul.

**MCS:** But tell me where is it located?

**GV:** It's on the boardwalk and right on the beach. To walk to the sand, it's like, say about 20 meters and the ocean is right there. That's the impression, that it's right on the beach. Many people sit there to look out at the ocean. Sometimes people ask me what's on that side and what's on the other side, and I say it's New Jersey over there. And they can't believe it and I say, that's where New Jersey starts and that's where it ends. And on the other side is Rockaway where the airport is. Sometimes people who come on vacation ask me, is this Coney Island? And I say yes, this is Coney Island. And what is that over there? Over there are the Rockaways. Well, we come from the airport. And I say well, over there it's all the Rockaways. And that's where JFK Airport is. Really, I say, it's true. I learned that from a person that had worked for many years in the park, he was a supervisor in the Parks Department. I don't know his real name. They just called him the Duke, Dukey. And once I asked him, hey Duke, people ask me the history of Coney Island and how long the boardwalk is. From end to end it's like two and a half miles long. That's what I didn't know because people asked me. They even ask me, New Jersey what is that, what is New Jersey? If it's an island or something. This guy, he had been working for many years, like 50 years in the park, the parks department. He became a supervisor and he told me a lot of things that I didn't know. No, he says, over there, look, that's Rockaway and over here, it's New Jersey, over here, it's Staten Island. Over there, Long island, over there is New York City. And so I learned a little bit of history. Not much, but now I know what's over here, over there and some other things that people ask about. The train stops, the last stop. All that information. That people ask when they come to Coney Island.

**MCS:** Do you have any special recipe for the hot dogs?

**GV:** The hot dogs are just brought over by the company. We always use the same brand. Always, always. But they are really tasty. Well, I like them and people like them. I don't understand, but they say...once, a person from Japan came buying hot dogs to see which one of all the Coney Island restaurants was the best one, that had the best hot dog and we got second place, of all the hot dogs. And at that time there were about 15 places—now there are about seven—and we were the second best.

**MCS:** What year was that?

**GV:** It was about six years ago. Even later someone else came and did this story on clams. She did a story and we got first place. They went around taste testing and

filming. And we were the best because, they said that the way to open them, they have to be removed whole and in other places, when they opened them, they would cut them into pieces and it didn't look good. People would say I don't want this, I don't like this. We were first place for the clams.

**MCS:** You told me that one thing you remember about Paul, was his obsession with caring for clams. Describe to me that legacy that Paul left you.

**GV:** Well, he would just work there, it was Paul's favorite place, with the clams. He was always there, stirring the clams, changing the ice, cleaning them, and always if there was a dead clam, he would take it out because, he says, the clam infects others and then they'd all die, he says. So he liked it and it was his hobby that he was always there checking on the clams, cleaning them. And if there was a bad one, he would take it out and throw it away. And that's what he taught me.

**MCS:** What is the difference between your work in the winter and the summer?

**GV:** Well, the difference is that in the summer, there are days that I spend stressed out because it's so many people, too many people who come to Coney Island. You get stressed out, but as I always say, I treat them the best I can, the nicest I can. I do my best for them, even if I'm very tired. Like, hey, I need this—or if I already delivered the order and they say, ah sorry I need something else. I say yes, sure, I'll bring it right over...it's what I always do. Even though I'm super tired. I always show up, so I'm happy, content, and actually whenever it's very busy I love it. It does stress me out a bit, but I like it because before I know it's time to go home. If it's slow, it's worse because it makes you sleepy, even more so when it's hot. When I go to work, I'm really there and I do my best. That's why I sleep well on those days. Even there are young people who work there and are always tired and sleepy. I talk to them. Like, you have to have the right mindset. Positive not negative, because if not, it's worse for you, you will feel more tired, because the brain works that way. If you feel good and start to move, what happens? The brain releases the adrenaline and the energy makes you feel good and if not, you go to sleep. Then they'll say, well I'm done. They go to ask the manager, can I go? Why if you just get here? It's just that I'm tired. But it's always the same, you always come tired. But they are young, you have to understand...but they don't sleep and they know they have to go to work.

**MCS:** How many people do you get per day in the summer season?

**GV:** In a day that is slow more than 100 and in a day that is super busy I think it's about 500.

**MCS:** And how is it in winter?



**GV:** In winter, it's also nice for walking around...

**MCS:** But how is the business?

**GV:** No, in the winter the business is closed, usually for four months.

**MCS:** When do you open for business?

**GV:** They open in March, on Palm Sunday. Sorry, Palm Sunday on the first day, which is when Lent starts and all that. That first day, Palm Sunday, we open to check that everything is working. There are the refrigerators, the gas, the lights, everything. We have to check that everything's working and on that first day that we open, the park also opens. After that it's only open on Saturdays and Sundays, until the summer slowly begins.

**MCS:** And when do they close?

**GV:** We usually close in August, September... in October. October is also when we start cleaning to leave everything disconnected because we have to turn off the water and other things, many machines so that they don't freeze because if they freeze everything would explode. The pipes would explode. Then from there we close for four months and in the winter it's closed for four months. But it's nice to go for a walk to Coney Island, to look at the beach that looks so crystalline, in the water it looks clean, when before you couldn't even see a fish. When I arrived, you couldn't see anything. Not now, now the waters are getting cleaner too. Because if you are there in winter or summer, you can walk around on the rocks, see how the fish are swimming there, which you didn't see before. So it's more beautiful. All this is changing for the better.

**MCS:** When did the business start?

**GV:** It's about 58 years old, since the first time Paul started with his partner.

**MCS:** And now, when you say your boss, it's Paul's daughter?

**GV:** Yes, Tina.

**MCS:** What is different about her with respect to Paul?

**GV:** Well, she is super nice, just like Paul, super nice, always comes and talks to you. How are you? What are you up to? If a client comes in and you're busy, she helps you. She helps us serve the customers. She's just like Paul, her charisma, her character, she's kind, always smiling. Good vibes.

**MCS:** And working in Coney Island, do you like it and why?

**GV:** Yes, I like it because if I didn't like it I wouldn't be here for more than 30 years now. That's why I like it. A lot of people tell me, oh you're going to retire here. Yes, they'll give you a little pension. It's a joke, here they don't give you a pension, but I like it for the people. The people are nice. Everything has changed. People always come and say ... hello, how are you? Those who know me, hello ... my family, my girlfriend, my wife. .... That makes me feel good. What I like about people who have changed for the better, now there are less problems. Everything is calm and I like that. That's why I'm still in Coney Island. Maybe I'll retire in another 10 years.