

Jennice Fuentes

Chief of Staff, Representative Luis Gutiérrez of Illinois

**Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript**

December 20, 2018

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

“It was a combination of so many injustices that our community and innocent people were facing that really was enough of an encouragement day in, day out to keep doing the work we did because it was not really easy but it really was right. It was what was right by us as human beings. I mean, we would often work really long hours—we didn’t get paid by hour here. And quite frankly salaries are low. It’s not like everybody was paid per hour and putting in overtime by staying in that workshop on a Saturday and a Sunday. But we did it with joy because we knew the need for this community to be protected—rightfully so, because they qualified—and to be empowered....So, no, none of us—from the caseworkers in the district office, which we had great, great staff, to Luis Gutiérrez, the Congressman himself, and all of us in between—none of us ever, ever, ever, ever waived.”

Jennice Fuentes
December 20, 2018

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Abstract

Jennice Fuentes started her career in the House of Representatives as a caseworker for Puerto Rican Resident Commissioners Jaime Fuster and Antonio Colorado and rose to be chief of staff for Illinois Representative Luis Gutiérrez. In this oral history, she describes her role helping constituents, advocating for Puerto Rico, and working on a diverse array of legislation throughout her time on Capitol Hill.

Fuentes discusses the challenges facing staff in the Resident Commissioner's office. Created in 1901, the position of Resident Commissioner has a circumscribed role in the House that differs from a U.S. Representative. While they are elected, serve on committees, and can introduce legislation like their colleagues, Resident Commissioners cannot vote on the House Floor. In her interview, Fuentes recalls the office's strategies to overcome these limitations, including efforts to educate House Members about Puerto Rico and its relationship with the mainland.

Fuentes also highlights the fundamental differences in priorities and possibilities for staff employed by a Member who can vote on the House Floor. After joining the staff of Representative Gutiérrez, who was of Puerto Rican descent, Fuentes concentrated on legislation related to immigration rights and reform. She recalls picking the Congressman up after his arrest at a protest for immigrant rights and the treatment of Puerto Rico by the U.S. government. She also remembers assisting migrants with the naturalization process during "citizenship days" in Representative Gutiérrez's Chicago district. As a woman of color, Fuentes hopes her work on Capitol Hill opened doors for other women seeking a professional career in Congress.

Biography

Jennice Fuentes' career in the House of Representatives spanned from the late 1980s to 2013. She worked for Puerto Rican Resident Commissioners Jaime Fuster and Antonio Colorado, as well as Illinois Representative Luis Gutiérrez, becoming his chief of staff in 2003. During her career, she developed a detailed knowledge of legislative strategy, brought the concerns of the Puerto Rican people to Capitol Hill, and helped constituents as a caseworker.

Born in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, Fuentes is the daughter of Rafael and Jenny Fuentes. She graduated high school from Colegio Puertorriqueño de Niñas and traveled to the mainland for college. She earned a bachelor's degree in government and foreign relations from Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and a master's degree in international relations from New York University in New York City.

In 1988, Resident Commissioner Jaime Fuster hired Fuentes as a caseworker in his office and promoted her to legislative assistant in 1989. In this position, she focused on the revision of the 1982 Coastal Barrier Resources Act, which identifies and protects coastal areas from over-development. When Fuster resigned from the House in March 1992 to serve as an associate justice on the Puerto Rican supreme court, Fuentes continued to work for the new Resident Commissioner, Antonio J. Colorado, as she looked for a new job.

That fall, she saw newly-elected Representative Luis Gutiérrez of Illinois speak at a conference on Puerto Rico. Impressed by his speech and excited by his ideas, she introduced herself to the Congressman and expressed her interest in working for him. After an interview, the office hired her.

Gutiérrez represented a predominantly Mexican-American district surrounding Chicago, Illinois, with a large immigrant population. Many constituents worked within the legal system to gain U.S. citizenship but were often victims of fraudulent services. In response, Fuentes and her colleagues registered the office as a community-based organization with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. This designation allowed Gutiérrez's staff to work one-on-one with constituents to complete their applications. Fuentes often traveled to Illinois to help district residents with the naturalization process, holding "citizenship days" in local schools and churches.

In 2003, Gutiérrez promoted Fuentes to chief of staff. Her responsibilities increased as she took on administrative duties and coordinated with the district office. With permission from the Congressman, Fuentes pursued an acting career and appeared in several TV shows during her time in the House.

In 2013, Fuentes retired from the House of Representatives. She now works for advocacy organizations and is a frequent guest on TV and radio news programs to discuss Puerto Rico.

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <http://history.house.gov>.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:

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Interviewer Biography

V. Grace Ethier is a researcher, writer, and oral historian for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned her B.A. in history from Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. She has been with the office since 2014 and leads the web production for the oral history team.

—JENNICE FUENTES—
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

ETHIER: This is Grace Ethier with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. It's December 20th, 2018, and joining me today is Jennice Fuentes, long time House staffer for Puerto Rican Resident Commissioners Jaime [B.] Fuster and Antonio [J.] Colorado, and former chief of staff for Illinois' Representative Luis [V.] Gutiérrez. We're in the House Recording Studio in the Rayburn House Office Building.

This interview is part of our ongoing project, *A Century of Women in Congress*, to commemorate the election and swearing-in of the first woman in Congress, Jeannette Rankin of Montana. Thank you so much for being here today and talking with me.

FUENTES: Thank you, Grace. My pleasure.

ETHIER: My first question is an easy one. Where did you grow up?

FUENTES: I was born and grew up in Puerto Rico, specifically in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, pretty much my entire life until I was 17 and I came here to the States.

ETHIER: And what were your parents' names and their jobs?

FUENTES: My father's name was Rafael Santiago Fuentes-Rivera, but known to his friends as "Cuquito". In Puerto Rico you use two last names, so Fuentes Rivera. My mother's name is Jenny Fernandez Calimano. They were married until my father died in 1991. My father was a criminal attorney and had his own law practice, and my mother was a housewife pretty much, although I think that if she had studied and gone to college she would have made a fine architect because she was all about design and structure.

ETHIER: You mentioned to me before, was your father involved in politics?

FUENTES: Yes, he was. He ran a few times unsuccessfully. {laughter} I remember he ran for mayor once, and then he ran for senate once—Puerto Rico, obviously—mayor of our town. Both times he lost, but he never really outgrew that passion for politics, and he was always involved in any level that he could—mostly fundraising. He used to be a bundler, which is what it's known now, but he used to love his party, the Commonwealth Party, which is called the Partido Popular Democrático, the PPD in Puerto Rico.

ETHIER: Did you ever have any roles in his campaigns?

FUENTES: Oh, no. I was way too young. No. I was younger than 10, so no, I didn't. But it was exciting to see him. In Puerto Rico, if you've ever been during the political season, it is a very different involvement than in the mainland because people get dressed up—back in the time when I was growing up. I haven't been at an election day there in a long time. It was very exciting because even your car, you put all kinds of color of your party that is actually up on election day, and it's a very exciting time, almost like a rugby match kind of day of excitement—not with the violence, obviously. That's how I remember being involved with politics because my father would be very excited on Election Day, and then he would do a lot of fundraising, but after losing the second time I think my mother said, “No, I think we're done.”
{laughter}

ETHIER: Did your mother play a role in his campaigns?

FUENTES: We're talking about 1960s, and I think my mother—no, not an active participant of the campaign, other than going to the events. But she was not a wife to be dialing for dollars or to be doing any of the aggressive backstage, Lady Macbeth kind of role. No. She was more laid back, more like a

southern belle, wanted to look beautiful at the events and be supportive in any way she could from the social aspect of it.

ETHIER: Briefly can you explain the Commonwealth Party and your father's political stance?

FUENTES: Politics in Puerto Rico, it's really unlike politics here. Because in the mainland we have the parties that we know—Democratic Party and we have the Republican Party, and then we have other parties. In Puerto Rico, growing up in the 1960s, 1970s, it was really about the Commonwealth Party, which is the party that promotes the status quo, which is the relationship we have with the United States—a Commonwealth of the United States, which basically gives us citizenship and other rights and also doesn't give us the right to vote for the presidential election and does not give us much representation in Congress. That's the Commonwealth Party, which in Spanish is Partido Popular Democrático.

The other main party is the Partido Nuevo Progresista, which, from its very beginning, has been supporting statehood for Puerto Rico, so that Puerto Rico would in essence become the 51st state. My brother, for example, is a member of that party. My father was a member of the opposite party. And I'm a member of neither, although if I had to relate to one, I'd probably relate more to the Commonwealth Party than to the Statehood Party.

ETHIER: How did you view DC from Puerto Rico?

FUENTES: It was a seat of government to me. I remember we had a daily newspaper, called *El Mundo* and my father would subscribe to it. It would come every morning, and I remember seeing the headlines even before I could read, and, "Well, these are very nice black and white pictures."

Later when I could figure out who the president was, I remember seeing a picture of our governor at the time, Luis A. Ferré, a member of a very prominent political family in Puerto Rico, with the president, which I can't remember right now if it was Gerald Ford—it wasn't President Kennedy—but it was the president of the United States. I recognized him, and I said, "Oh my God. That's huge. That's our governor with the president, who is a really, really important person." I remember as a child looking at the president thinking, through the pictures, that that was an important moment. But I really didn't grow up being a geek or nerd thinking, "Oh, this is political stuff that I need to pay attention." No, I was more artistic in nature, and I was more interested in being an actor than anything else.

ETHIER: So what was your understanding of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the mainland?

FUENTES: When I was a child or later on?

ETHIER: When you were a child, yes.

FUENTES: When I was a child, it wasn't clear to me that the United States was that different, because I didn't know it. I didn't really speak English. My mother was raised in the Bronx, so technically she spent her formative years in New York. My father was from Puerto Rico and we used to travel to visit our relatives in the Bronx, but I didn't—because we're all Puerto Rican, and speaking Spanish, and we stayed in our little, tight communities when we went, I never thought it was that different until I became an adult.

My mother spoke English, and she would speak it with our guests, which made me think I spoke English too because I understood what they were saying, but it's not the same. {laughter} Listening to somebody and following the conversation is not the same as being able to speak to you in a coherent

way. So I never really understood how different we were as countries, right, until I came to live here.

But I grew up with a great affection for the mainland. And we're U.S. citizens. For me, as a child, that seemed awesome. I remember traveling with our U.S. passport, and being so proud, and seeing the line with other people who were trying to get into the country. We would go right ahead. As a child it's the simple things. You don't make any kind of great assessment.

My parents were not in any way steering me in any direction, one way or the other. Either we have to be all in Puerto Rico and the States—not so much. No, there was no such thing. We grew up loving our time spent on the mainland and coming here often for vacations.

ETHIER: Did you have any female role models growing up?

FUENTES: In Puerto Rico, growing up, I had my parents and then I had my godparents, which were like a team. It was four of them all the time. They were friends and the weekends they were all together. I've got to tell you that both my godparents were great role models.

Obviously, every child's first role model is her parents, right, so my case was both my parents. My father's a professional, and my mom was a woman who was very strong and yet very beautiful and was very concerned with fashion. It's like a balance between watching my father do what he did and then watching my mother walk into a room and everybody would be quiet. And I'm like, okay, that worked.

There was that and then there was my godparents, Maria Montañez and Pepin Villares, who were great because of their great affection for each other, but how strong they were. I loved that. I think all four of these adults marked

who I would eventually become by watching their respective relationships and two men who were professional and the two women were not professional outside of the house. I think being a housewife and running the household of the home is profession enough. So I don't mean that in a bad way, but the men were out to make the money while the women would make sure the men could stay out making the money and keeping all the trains running on time.

I think that one of my earliest images of somebody as a role model was really my mother structuring and balancing the balancing act that it meant to be married, to be a man's third wife, and the four children that that brought, along with the two of us in our house. So that was six children every weekend. For me it seemed like, well, this is a lot even then {laughter} and we were always doing something. My father always had a big car. We were always going into, like, the country or the beach and it's like the logistics of all that, and her working through all that, and always looking beautiful. Looking back I'm like, "Woah, that was a feat," because I don't know what I would've looked like having six kids, all of them under 15. Those were my earlier role models as a child and then later obviously I would have more.

Another role model—which is somebody I've never met, clearly, but the more I read about her and the more I see her works, the more I admire because of the time—is Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, which was a nun who went into the life of service to God because it was the only way that she could grow intellectually and have access to the libraries at the time. I find that everything that she pursued and everything she wrote was quite out there for the time, which to me seemed amazing that she had the strength and the conviction as a beautiful young woman to let go of all the offers that were out there and to pursue her passions and interest. The second I heard and read

more about Sor Juana Inés De la Cruz, I was fascinated by her as a historical figure.

ETHIER: What else drew you to her? How did she stay with you throughout the years?

FUENTES: The unfairness of it all. If you come to my office I have a huge poster of her. I think she was probably, if not the first feminist, one of the first feminists. We're talking, I think, fifteenth century. She was part of the court of the queen, but she was in Mexico, I believe, some of the time. It's really the bravery and the courage of pursuing her conviction because a woman at that time, especially a young and attractive woman, would have ended up getting married well, having a family, and being a kept woman. Not being an assertive, kickass woman who out there pursued her passion for learning, which was really her passion, and for making statements, and for what she thought was right and the way that things should be, instead of the way things were at the time.

For a beautiful woman like her, who was so smart, to give up a life that would have been a very easy life. Then, much like women who were pioneers at the time, you didn't get the support of a lot of the people in control who were mostly male. She eventually got taken off the court and went to work in a nunnery, and I think she was working with lepers and eventually she died young. That is the whole tragedy of that talent wasted, but yet it was not wasted because it got to inspire people like me, many centuries later, who knew about her life and read her poetry and her works with great admiration.

ETHIER: Great. Going back to the career path—what were your career paths as a young woman in Puerto Rico and what did you want to do versus what was expected of you?

FUENTES:

I always wanted to be an actor. I was an actor in high school, and I was acting in high school plays, and I thought that was the best thing ever. I will never forget the excitement of my first high school play, and the curtain going up—which was *Blithe Spirit* by Noël Coward, in Spanish of course, and I was Elvira, the blithe spirit. {laughter} I was wearing a chiffon thing and a blonde wig that was all the way down—I looked like Lady Godiva. It was so exciting when that curtain opened and I walked in and there it was, I was the blithe spirit, and the crowd—I was totally hooked ever since that day.

The opposite can be said of my dad. He thought this was the worst idea ever. He equated acting to prostitution and he thought, “Absolutely no daughter of mine is going to be an actor.” So being the good Puerto Rican daughter—I somehow wasn’t as brave and defiant as maybe I would’ve been today. I mean, this was a time where there’s no internet, there’s no cell phones, there’s no computers. There is not really a lot of options and you trying to figure it out. “Okay, well, he says no, but I’m going to figure it out myself.” There was no such thing really available back there in 1980s.

So what I did is I pursued a career that I thought he would approve of. He really expected me to be a lawyer, but I never became a lawyer. I thought that was too much of a commitment for something I really didn’t want for myself, and I got my master’s in government, and then I figured a good compromise would be to come work in Congress because I knew how excited he was about public service, and government affairs. He found Congress fascinating in terms of the power they had over Puerto Rico. I said, “Well, if I go work there in the one office that we have representing Puerto Rico, I think he would be excited,” and he was very thrilled when I got my first job on Capitol Hill. Yet he still saw it as a pathway to law school. I remember him saying, “That’s great because she can be there for a year or a few months and

then apply to law school, and then everything will be fine.” And I’m like {sighs}.

ETHIER: And then you stayed for 25 years. {laughter}

FUENTES: No, that’s not—everything will not be fine. But at the end of the day he died tragically young, so that discussion was never a discussion that had to happen because I just stayed and then I never had that pressure because unfortunately he passed away.

ETHIER: You went to school in Massachusetts.

FUENTES: Yes.

ETHIER: In Worcester, Massachusetts. And, let’s see, you mentioned that you traveled to New York before you went to school in Massachusetts. How would you compare your time in the United States—before schooling—and Puerto Rico? Or where you were in the United States and Puerto Rico?

FUENTES: I never had an idea of living here until I came to college. I think much like people who have never experienced a transition like that. It’s an adjustment. I thought that I would love it, and I did, and I loved being away from Puerto Rico as a change. It was a new challenge.

It was an adjustment in terms of the language mostly because I couldn’t understand anything. It was shocking. I’d gone to a high school where English—all the books were in English, and we had, like, English literature, and we had a few of the classes were in English, and yet I couldn’t even understand the radio or the television. I could be watching the images saying, “What exactly did she say?” which was a problem when I got to the classroom

because my comprehension of English was really on the floor. I couldn't really understand, and I couldn't really express myself properly.

I remember my English teacher at the time—I even remember her name, Roberta Toby—she asked a question about an Emily Dickinson poem that I had read in my English literature class back in high school and I knew the answer about the interpretation, and I raised my hand and I could not explain what I meant. Everybody just stared at me and said, “Is she having a stroke?” I couldn't say anything that made sense. So I said, “Oh my God, I don't really understand how to speak fluently and translate those thoughts that I'm having in Spanish into a sentence in English that makes total sense.” That was a problem for the first year that I was living in the States, but other than that I loved it.

The weather didn't bother me at all. That it was so cold in Massachusetts as you and I know. I loved it. I mean, I remember not knowing anything about snow and the first snow storm in Worcester from my freshman dorm, I looked out the window and everybody was, like, “Oh my God, let's go play in the snow.” So I'm like, “Me too.” I went out there and I went to play in the snow in tennis shoes and no coat. The frostbite was horrible. {laughter} And then, of course, I got myself in a hot shower not feeling my own skin and I looked like I was on fire. And, oh, the pain in my hands and my feet—so I learned my lesson! It was sad.

ETHIER: Yes, rather quickly. Fast forwarding to your time on the Hill. What was the interview process like to work in Fuster's office?

FUENTES: Before that I was an intern at Amnesty International, and I was an unpaid intern. I was trying to figure out how to get on the Hill and I looked up the directories—this was before the internet—and I noticed that Jaime Fuster

used to sit in the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

I figured that I had written my thesis in human rights and I thought that maybe because he was serving in that committee, I could be of use to him. That's what I wrote in my cover letter, which I personally delivered. A few days later had a phone call from his chief of staff, who was a woman, who said to come in because they would like to talk to me. Of course, I'm there thinking that they're going to invite me to take care of everything related to international relations and human rights. Well, no. I got offered a job as a caseworker {laughter} which I was, like, confused by because I'm like this seems really low, entry-level position, a little higher than answering phones.

You see, this is where you don't know anything about anything, right? I had no clue about jobs on the Hill. I thought because I had a master's degree I would be offered a big job, like legislative assistant, which I knew was all the rage for somebody young and so talented. But, no, that's not what they offered. They offered a caseworker position and for a salary of \$14,500. After taxes it's less than \$1,000 a month. And you know on the Hill you get paid once a month. So I was like, "Oh." But then my friends said, "You know what, take whatever they give you. It doesn't matter, because once you're in the door you can work your way up." So that's what I did. I took the offer of caseworker on February 5th, 1988, a Friday {laughter} and I was like, whatever. On that Friday in 1988 I began my journey on Capitol Hill.

ETHIER: Wow. Did you find that the House was welcoming to you as a young woman?

FUENTES: Oh yes. Those were other times. I mean, it was I think at the time Speaker [Thomas Philip (Tip) O'Neill [Jr.], and Jim [James Claude] Wright [Jr.],

and everybody was so gentlemanly. You would read about them in the papers, and then you saw them, and they were such figures. Back then we didn't know that much about our elected officials. Now we know everything and then some and too much.

Back then it was like a dream come true. I mean, I didn't realize how much I would enjoy public service until I came. Being a caseworker became a huge reveal and a discovery about myself and my own skillset and desire to help people. I think that's where the real public service really began. When you're a caseworker there's nothing about policy. You're not advising anyone about anything that could be good for your district, for the country, or for anyone for that matter. You're helping people one on one with their cases, and it really is being a caseworker. It's really work that normally is done by the district office of the congressional offices. But because in Puerto Rico, it was a constituency at the time—there was more than three million people—we had a lot of work and so they gave cases also to people in the Washington, DC, office.

I discovered very quickly that I had a talent for helping people because I enjoyed it, and if you came to me with your problem I would want to help you and fix it. I would open a file and if it was—it was simple things. I wasn't saving lives. But it was things like, you hadn't received your veteran benefits, or you were having trouble getting an appointment, or you moved and Social Security's check had not arrived, or you felt discriminated against because x, y, z, or your fiancée was having a problem with her visa and she couldn't get the visa. It's all these little things that when you solve them it made such a difference in someone's life. You got these glowing letters of how you'd done—it's almost like I had saved them. Some people even wrote to the newspaper and put a letter to the editor and mentioned me about how

grateful they were, and how this office was working, and I was like, “Oh, there we go. That’s pretty good. I’m proud. I did a good job. I helped those people.”

That kind of launched me on the public service path because I loved it. Even as my career here developed and I became more immersed in management, and in policy issues, and making political decisions, that stayed with me. I was a caseworker. I would take a case or two every month. I always did casework. To this day I find it fascinating.

ETHIER: Can you briefly explain how Resident Commissioners are different than other Members of Congress?

FUENTES: Well, that’s easy. They don’t vote. They don’t vote. Before Newt [Newton Leroy] Gingrich became Speaker they at least could vote in the Committee of the Whole, so I guess they could vote when it didn’t matter. When you come out of the Committee of the Whole, then it’s when it really would make a difference, and they could never vote there.

It’s different in two key ways. First, they cannot vote on the floor of the House. Secondly, they don’t really have a delegation behind them. A delegation like Connecticut, which is small, you would have the Member and you would have the Senators. California, which is one of our largest states, you have all those Members and then you have the two Senators. There is weight that comes with that voting bloc, and there’s alliances, and there’s coalitions that you can form with your like-minded Members. The Member from Puerto Rico is always alone. He would have to make his alliances within their party, but they don’t have a delegation and that’s to their detriment.

ETHIER: So how did they make up for lack of delegation?

FUENTES:

Back in the day when I used to work for the Office of the Resident Commissioner, they would work very closely with the Office of the Governor. It was like that was their delegation. The Resident Commissioner would work side by side with the governor—actually dictating the agenda and the Resident Commissioner, and all of us who worked for him, following what both of them decided.

But it was a team. It was teamwork, which doesn't exist today between those offices, by the way, but used to when I was there. When you have a governor walking into a congressional office lobbying for the interest of his constituents, it's powerful and it can yield results. That's what we had. We had the governor and his staff.

And obviously Puerto Rico has always had friends. Back in the time Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Senator from New York, was one of our big supporters. Senator [Edward Moore (Ted)] Kennedy and his family have always been supportive of Puerto Rico. So we had very heavy hitters on the Senate that would always work with the governor and assist us. I can't think, besides Senator Bob [Robert] Menendez today, of a Senator who has put skin in the game and has spoken up to defend and protect Puerto Rico's interests. I think that that's sorely missing.

ETHIER:

What were some of the challenges that you faced as a staff of the Resident Commissioner?

FUENTES:

I think that one of the issues that we would face would be that, because we didn't vote, that people would not want to negotiate or take us seriously when we weren't in a committee situation, heading to the floor. Because you vote in committee, so that kind of makes you a participant in the process when you have the committee hearings, when you have the committee

markups you can amend. But then you lose track and you lose access to all that power when you get to the floor because you don't really vote on the floor. So it was maintaining those alliances. You didn't have much to work with, because you can't be there at the end of the game, right?

So that was an issue and yet it was a process issue. In terms of dealing with my colleagues and dealing with the other offices, outside of partisan differences, I can't tell you that it was a terrible experience. I thought that it was interesting and fascinating to deal with all those offices and try to figure out how can we be plugged in through the end when we don't have a vote on the floor.

ETHIER: So what did the Resident Commissioner spend most of their time on? Was it in committees? Was it in hearings? Was it introducing bills and looking for sponsors? Was there an education aspect that they had to educate other Members of Congress about Puerto Rico?

FUENTES: Educating Members of Congress about Puerto Rico and their staff has always been an issue and I think that is the biggest hurdle that any Resident Commissioner has to clear. Because we assume that people know—since we've been U.S. citizens since 1917—that everybody knows that we are part of the United States, that we have the same currency, that we have pretty much—we don't have our own military. We're part of the United States military and we have been since World War I, pretty much. We have served with distinction in all the wars. I think that the residents in the mainland who are not a Puerto Rican extraction forget that. I think that Members of Congress also forget how many Puerto Ricans are in their constituency because there's more Puerto Ricans today living in the mainland than living on the Island. I think the importance of educating the public about the presence of these large Puerto Rican communities is huge.

Educating Members of Congress who basically create and pass our laws is even more important because sometimes that gets lost in all of the many other issues that are just as important as Puerto Rico that are on the agenda today. Having to educate people is a challenge. Or it's not a challenge maybe, but it's a job that is always there. You cannot just say, "Okay, we're done. They know that we're—" No. There are new Members and new staff. That is always necessary.

Part of the agenda, and the answer to your question, is it's whatever would help Puerto Rico's economic growth and whatever would help Puerto Rico be stable in its existence with the United States. We do not receive the same amount of benefits and many of the programs that Puerto Rico, if it was a state, would normally qualify for. So I think the ballot was always to get more federal funds for the programs, and at the time protect the section of the tax code—it used to be called Section 936.

ETHIER: What did you learn about legislative strategy by working for Resident Commissioners?

FUENTES: You know what, not much. {laughter} Because we were more focused on the committee work on Natural Resources [Committee], which is the committee of jurisdiction. What was so strange was that you would do all that work, but then you would never pay attention to the floor, because they [the Resident Commissioners] didn't vote. It was totally disjointed that we would do all this work and then we never really pay attention to what was happening on the floor day to day—only if it was that bill. That one bill that we're working on in Natural Resources that eventually made it to the floor, then we'd be all paying attention.

To me it seemed that we were working in some kind of isolation from the rest of Congress and the rest that was going on in terms of the machinery of producing bills and amendments that this place can be. I thought that that was a little bit of a break in the communication in terms of our office and the greater world at large in Congress, which changed when I went to work for Congressman Luis Gutiérrez.

ETHIER: Going back to the Coastal Barriers Resources Act—focusing on that act and passing it—did you switch gears from constituent service to trying to get this thing passed?

FUENTES: Yes. Yes, I did. One of the big things that happened when I worked for Jaime Fuster, he was—rest in peace—he was funny. He was an attorney. He was a very good attorney. He had a very good elastic and legal mind. He could think of things and see things from different points of view, but always be observant of the law, which I thought was fascinating being the daughter of an attorney. But he also was very stubborn. In his mind you had to be an attorney to be a legislative assistant [LA], which you and I know is ridiculous. {laughter} What is that?

I remember when I got there I said, “My ambition here is to be promoted and be considered for the next open legislative assistant job. Thank you.” Because I got great reviews, and they were so happy with my work. I got the great raise from \$14,000 to \$15,000, {laughter} and then to \$19,000, and it was, like, great, at this rate I might be able to buy a meal {laughter} by the time four years are over. But I knew that I could do more than casework, and I was excited and really wanted that LA job, and the Congressman said, “You really have to be an attorney to be a legislative assistant in this office.” Like, well, I don’t have time to go to law school and funny you should say that

because my dad's been bothering me to go to law school but we don't have that kind of time, do we?

It was a great source of pride that he made me the first LA that was not an attorney. He made it very clear that I worked under the huge weight on my shoulders that I was going to be an LA without being an attorney. I said, "I thought we had legislative counsel to write the bills?" {laughter} I was excited to cross over and be an LA, and that's why I was able to deal with the Coastal Barriers Resources Act because when you're the first one in you get the stuff that no one else wants. Everybody else wanted to be dealing with the tax code—so that was Section 936—and everybody else wanted to deal with health, and Medicare, Medicaid, food stamp programs, all that stuff that deals with federal funding. Nobody was dealing with natural resources—that's the environment and that was not popular at the time—and I said, "I'll take it." I didn't have a choice. What they did is they dumped on me what they didn't want. That was fine.

That was the most exciting thing that happened because it happened to coincide with the time that this Coastal Barrier Resource Bill was going to be redone, which meant that it was an opportunity for us to look at the map and figure out which zones were rightfully and should be described as coastal barriers, which means they're not as stable. Then you shouldn't be building there and if you're [on] a coastal barrier then you have to go a little further or somewhere else.

So we worked with the Natural Resources Department of Puerto Rico. I remember working with Dr. Barbara Cintron at the time—I loved her. She was fabulous—and going over the maps and seeing all this cartography and going, "Okay, how many miles, how far out?" She was the one who knew. We went too and we did a flyover, and we looked, and what do I know?

{laughter} I don't have her background. But it was exciting to then look at the sites and look at the maps and saying, "Okay, so this is or this is not— whoever drafted this map has never been to Puerto Rico so that doesn't qualify," so that we could protect those areas that needed to be protected and also leave opportunity for development where there should be opportunity for development. It could be balanced. That was pretty exciting, going right in there with legislation and maps and deciding what would be in the best interests of the Island of Puerto Rico. I was very proud of that and it was exciting.

ETHIER: So finally you did watch the floor. Is that something that you watched the floor for the final vote on?

FUENTES: You know what? Typically speaking, no. I think we went back to the committee and those were the maps that were taken in, and they were adopted, and nobody questioned them, and then I don't remember if we watched the floor or didn't watch the floor.

ETHIER: Was your office celebratory when it passed?

FUENTES: I hope so. {laughter}

ETHIER: You were.

FUENTES: I was.

ETHIER: That's what counts.

FUENTES: The Resident Commissioner was very excited, and he thought that this had been great success and we had gotten what we wanted because we had to go defend what we thought was right. I think the reason we were reviewing the maps was because somebody had made a determination that these maps did

not reflect our realities. In some areas there may be already hotels that are there and there would be properties and would be whole communities that are there, so we needed to have a revision and see which of these maps actually are correct and which ones need to be corrected. That's the work that I helped do.

ETHIER: How did working for a Resident Commissioner—two of them—prepare you to work for a voting Member of Congress?

FUENTES: They didn't {laughter} at all, because we didn't pay attention to the floor. I had enough of a network that I had built in the four years prior, so I knew how to deal with congressional staff. I had the opportunity of working with the committee, so I knew the structure and how you get things done via the committee and knew everything about the hearings, about the markups, about preparing testimony for the floor even because he did go and make speeches on the floor. But the floor and everything else that goes with that final step in legislation was usually lost in translation until a lot later when I spent time on the floor with a voting Member. You could carry the bill from drafting it with leg council until it went to the White House and signed into law. That journey did not start until I worked with Congressman Gutiérrez.

ETHIER: We can take a quick break here.

END OF PART ONE ~ BEGINNING OF PART TWO

ETHIER: How did you start working for Gutiérrez's office?

FUENTES: Oh my goodness. Congressman Luis Vicente Gutierrez Olmedo. I didn't know him. I didn't know of him even. I didn't even know he was Puerto

Rican, and at that point I had never even visited Chicago. I went to a conference on Puerto Rico that fall of '92. I was in the audience like anyone else and he went on stage and gave a speech. He was fiery, and it was contagious, and we were all like, "Woo!" And we were going {clapping} and I remember going to the guy next to me, who was a reporter named Bob Friedman, I said, "Who is he? Who is that guy?" And Mr. Friedman went, "Well, he's Puerto Rican, like you. You don't know him?" I was like, "No, what's his name?" "Luis Gutierrez, from Chicago." I said, "Introduce me."

I was in my 20s, I was very young, and I went up to him, and I was so excited, and said, "I believe in everything you said. I want to help you with your agenda. I'm unemployed—or I will be in a few weeks—here's my card." He was standing next to his wife, Soraida, so I give her my card because I didn't know him, and everyone's going to think something weird about me giving him my card, so I gave it to her.

The man I saw on stage was a very exciting presence. He was 38 at the time, so he was also a young guy—older than me, but young, certainly now that I look back. We left that age a long time ago. But he was so forceful and funny in his message, and everything he said was contagious. I felt that although I never met him or even read about him, I felt that everything he said, and the way he said it, made me think that I knew him. I made a split-second decision before I gave him my card and told him I wanted to work for him.

I thought, although I don't know him, I think I know who this man is, and I think this man is going to be inclusive, which I had not experienced before. I think this man is going to be funny to work with, which I had not experienced before. I think this man is brilliant, but I've worked with brilliant men before, but brilliant in a kind of fun way. In the way that he teaches you, and you're going to make discoveries, and that he's going to be a

great mentor. I made all those assessments just on the spot because I was so into the message and so taken away by his presence and who I thought he was.

And, you know, I was so right. It was the best decision I've ever made. I said he's going to be smart, he's going to be inclusive, he's going to be funny, for me as a woman he's going to be respectful, and he's going to help me grow as a professional. Somehow I know all this by watching him up there—that's the man who he became in my life. I didn't know it at the time, but I guess God put me in that place for that reason.

Then I got a call from his chief of staff at the time, Doug Scofield, and they brought me in to interview me, and they made me an offer, like, two days later. So it's also about, without knowing, being in the right place in the right time. Because if I had never extended my arm and said, "Hi, my name is Jennice Fuentes and I want to help you and work with you. You're a Congressman-elect. Hire me," and him knowing that I existed, how would I have gotten the job, right? It was a great, great moment in my life, attending that conference, meeting Congressman Gutiérrez and becoming part of his team. I'm still in my 20s. That was back in the fall of 1992.

ETHIER: When you arrived in his office and started working did anything strike you as significantly different from the Resident Commissioners' offices?

FUENTES: Yes, definitely. Everything was different. It was a lot less pomp and circumstance. It seemed a lot more like an operation that you were working, boots on the ground, every day. We were working as a team and all of us were important members of that team. We would have staff meetings that included all of us. {laughter} That was new. We had situations where my opinion really mattered, and that to me was, like, "Oh, all of you spoke, and

you want to know what I think, and you're going to go with my recommendation? That's amazing." That's the first time that happened. It was different in every possible way it could be, in the right direction. It was awesome.

I think as a leader at the time when I was so young and inexperienced, he showed respect for what I had to say, and he was very inclusive in what I had to suggest and asked me all the right questions. It made me feel that I belonged there, that this was no fluke, that all the work that I'd done before had prepared me. The work that I had done for the Resident Commissioner had given me a skill set and now I was going to grow it into something, into its full possibility by working with Luis Gutiérrez.

And interesting for me was always working for Puerto Rico. Because the other two [bosses] were Puerto Ricans, we were working for Puerto Rico, and here is yet my third Puerto Rican boss, and helping Chicago, but our Puerto Rican community in Chicago. It set me on the path of working with and for Puerto Ricans for my entire professional career, and it was just the way it turned out. I think that I happened to meet Luis Gutiérrez for that reason, as it turns out.

It was, again, a great source of pride and joy in my professional career. Unlike most members of the diaspora—I am one by having left the Island and made my career and my life here, you get detached and you grow away from the day to day issues of the Island, and sometimes you don't have an opportunity to make a difference and help. In this case I was always connected to the Island and that was to my joy and to the benefit of all because I think I was able to be helpful to our Puerto Rican community in Chicago and actually in Puerto Rico, since so many people from Puerto Rico came asking for help in the office when I was there.

ETHIER: Wow. Representative Gutiérrez was the first Hispanic elected from Illinois. What did that mean for the district and the state?

FUENTES: Well, there were a lot of expectations and it was a huge, huge opportunity for anybody who ran and got elected. It was mostly a Mexican district, although there were so many Puerto Ricans. The Fourth Congressional District of Illinois was Hispanic, but mostly Mexican. I'm sure that it was an issue for some people on the ground, but at the end of the day we worked for everyone and we worked a lot and for the longest time on the immigration issue, which we all know does not affect Puerto Ricans because we are born U.S. citizens. It really affects everybody else. We worked very hard for all those communities, obviously.

ETHIER: That year, 1992, is also considered the "Year of the Woman" because so many new women were elected to Congress. You had been working here for a number of years beforehand, so what was it like for you to see so many new women coming into Congress that year in '93?

FUENTES: It was very exciting. In 1992, *Life* magazine, which now doesn't exist anymore, did a cover story that said, "If Women Ran America." And I remember having a friend at the time, Karen Rose, who says, "Hey, there's going to be—we're going to take a picture on the steps. Show up on the Hill at this time, on the steps. I'll be there too."

So of course I went there, and what the photographer had done is at the time we only had two women in the Senate—it was Nancy [Landon] Kassebaum and Barbara [Ann] Mikulski, and that was it—so what the photographer did is he did the inverse. So it was 98 women on the Capitol steps posing as Senators and two men. I am in that picture in the front row. Poor Karen was in the back somehow, although it had been her invitation I ended up in the

front, maybe because I'm tall, and I don't know, it was not fair. {laughter} But to this day that, to me, marked a very visual way of how things were changing and would eventually change. I think now we have 23 women on the Senate, perhaps. So that was pretty exciting and, yes, it continues to evolve. I think we're not all there yet, but we're surely on our way.

ETHIER: Legislative strategy in a voting Member's office, how is that different than working in a Resident Commissioner's office?

FUENTES: Legislative strategy in a voting Member's office is, from A to Z, what it should be. You don't depend on anyone to shepherd your way to the floor of the House. You can do everything, including voting, and carry it to the grand finale of the legislation. I experienced, for the first time, the complete process, from concept, to execution, to passage, and then celebration—not too many of those, but some. It was seeing the reason why we're all here. We're here to have our own small impact in the laws of this country and be able to fight for what you believe in, and in that, benefit the largest amount of people that could benefit from any legislation.

I'm telling you I have great respect and love for this institution. To this day when I see the dome, I always want to cry because it's so beautiful and what it stands for in terms of legislation, how laws are passed. That collaboration that now is so missing, but back then it was so possible to work with the other side, and work with Republicans, and be always in a dialogue and not a debate necessarily. To consider your opponent really a friend and not an enemy or a villain, which is what really happens now unfortunately. I didn't experience that. When I was here, and working on bills, and going to the floor of the House, it was at a time when we all got along. We all had our differences, and sometimes we had to agree to live with those differences,

because it's not like every day was kumbaya and we were going to be singing by the fire. But we got stuff done, and people loved to work here.

I would say that as much turnover as there's always been on the Hill—and so much of it now—back in the day I think Congressman Gutiérrez's office was famous for having the least turnover. Most of us used to stay there for 10 years, if not more. I stayed for 20. {laughter}

ETHIER: Fast forwarding—only because I want to make sure that we can squeeze everything in—you became chief of staff in 2003.

FUENTES: Yes.

ETHIER: How did that happen?

FUENTES: That happened quite by accident. I think as I told you earlier I was able to have a small acting career on the side because the Congressman allowed it. I had parts and that year had a huge part in a show called *K Street*. It was an HBO show, and Steven Soderbergh was directing it, and George Clooney was camera believe it or not, and it was great. I think that my life was so balanced. I used to review movies for local papers, and I used to do radio, and I thought it was great. I had a very good life as a legislative director.

Doug Scofield, our wonderful chief of staff, left to run a campaign of a candidate for governor in Illinois, and I found out the same day he left. It was quite accidental. I had no preparation. I had no idea that Doug was leaving us. I loved him. I thought he was such a brilliant guy and knew so much about everything. He was a great writer. He would edit all my stuff and give me advice. I grew so much with him. And then he left. He left almost as if he had been abducted by aliens. He left a half-eaten sandwich, his shoes were there, there were coins, there were stamps, there was mail to be sent, the

computer was still running. I'm like, "What happened? Where did he go?"
{laughter} "He left." I was like, "He left? What does that mean, he left?"

That's how I got my job. It was quite accidental. The Congressman called me in—and actually Doug was still there that morning—and said, "Hey, so how would you like to be chief of staff?" I said, "What do you mean? What's wrong with the one we have? He's great. I can never be him." He had to explain, and I remember I started crying because it was so unexpected, and I really loved the team. I said, "What do you mean? Now I got to do all this work?" And, I mean, it sounds great, the title, but I really had no clue what I was getting myself into. No clue.

ETHIER: How many women were chiefs of staff when you took on that role?

FUENTES: Not many. I think I may have been the first and only Puerto Rican woman to have that role in a congressional office that was not the Resident Commissioner. I don't know, but I think it had been a very small universe.

ETHIER: Were the other chiefs welcoming to you?

FUENTES: Oh yes. There's a little community of chiefs of staff that you have meetings, and you have events that you get together, and I find that in the earlier delegation we had a few [women], which was fantastic because you have that sisterhood going on. I know as a fact that the entire time I was here there was an immediate kinship if there was somebody else who was a female and a chief of staff, and you could very quickly connect, even if you were working with them for the first time. I found it very supportive and already in place, culture and community already on the Hill.

ETHIER: What was it that drew you all together?

FUENTES: I think as women we had certain things in common, but some of us didn't have the same lives. Like, when I became a chief of staff, I wasn't married. I didn't have children—I don't have children—so I would bring in a different perspective and a different load. I probably would be complaining about different things than they would be complaining about, and I have other things to balance than they would. So it was learning from each other and trying to figure out, “Okay, so how do you deal with it? Okay, interesting. So I deal with it this way.” And having that lowest common denominator being that we all worked here and we are all subject to those crazy hours and sometimes the crazy situations. We still have to be women in our families, and to our husbands, or partners, or friends. I think that's what glued us together, having to have the balance of what is expected of us as women and our jobs as chiefs of staff.

ETHIER: Great. What new challenges did you face as chief of staff?

FUENTES: In the office?

ETHIER: Yes.

FUENTES: I think the biggest challenge was the stuff that I had to leave behind. I loved policy work and at the time I used to work with immigration day in, day out. I absolutely love immigration work, love strategizing with stakeholders, love coming up with ideas to do whatever it took to help the economy. I remember that the DREAM [Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors] Act was originally our idea in the office—and it was not even called the DREAM at the time, but it was called something else. Because as the chief of staff I didn't have time to delve in there, deep dive, and go into policy and spend hours going over, “Which section are we going to change and how? What is the impact?” I could not do that anymore.

I became a manager. I became a manager of 22 people plus the Congressman, budgets, signing off many, many things that before weren't there, attending a lot more meetings, dealing with a whole universe of people that I never dealt with before. It was to my detriment and loss that I couldn't deal—really in a responsible way—deal with policy issues and had to leave the immigration issue behind.

ETHIER: When Jeannette Rankin served in Congress in 1917 a lot of attention was paid to her dress and her demeanor because she was the first woman to serve in Congress. Was this something that you encountered at the staff level, this close attention to your dress and your demeanor? Your presentation?

FUENTES: Yes. I think that I've always dressed maybe different than most people in this building. I love fashion and I remember I used to wear—I still do—leather. I would walk in {laughter} in a congressional situation with maybe a suede outfit, or maybe leather pants, or even a leather skirt of some fashion or another, or maybe sometimes miniskirts, heels all the time. I think that it may have taken people some adjusting to. I didn't see it as a problem. The Congressman, they never sent me home to change. He never had an opinion one way or the other. I never asked. I figured if it was wrong somehow he would've told me. Clearly no cleavage. It's nothing like you could've worn in the club, but it was more a fashion forward—maybe would be more New York than DC. But if it created a problem for me I didn't care, so I didn't notice. {laughter}

ETHIER: Awesome. Did Gutiérrez and your office feel like surrogate representatives for Puerto Rico?

FUENTES: Oh yes, every day. I think that he was always in the press, and he was always speaking up for Puerto Rico from his perspective on what he thought was

right, and, yes, we had an entire operation that was helping the Island. My deputy chief of staff, Enrique Fernandez, was dealing with Puerto Rico every day, from stakeholders walking through our doors wanting us to get involved in x, or y, or z, to issues that were being considered in Congress that had to do with Puerto Rico.

The Congressman had a real commitment to the constituents, the Puerto Rican constituents in our district—because it's so interconnected, the presence of the Puerto Ricans here, to our families who are back in Puerto Rico. We're like extended family. You don't really cut that cord ever. I think that a lot of the Puerto Ricans in Chicago felt that they had to reach out to us for help with the Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico, and we did that. I mean, we serve as both for the better part of 20 years that I was there.

ETHIER: So how did your office balance district work and also work for Puerto Rico? Did you ever receive criticism for maybe focusing on Puerto Rico—

FUENTES: Oh yes. I mean, everything is political at the end of the day. There was a lot of criticism from people from the Statehood Party saying that he lived in Chicago, to mind his own business, that we had no reason to be involved, that why don't we go home. It was funny that at the time there was a resolution passed in the Puerto Rican congress calling Luis Gutiérrez persona non grata for—I don't even remember the language of the resolution—but we thought it was hysterical and we laughed about it. The Congressman promptly had it framed and put it in our lobby. {laughter}

So of course he was criticized. Often the criticism was, "Why doesn't he move to Puerto Rico if he wants to be dealing with Puerto Rico?" You don't have to go live in Syria to care about Syria if you are a former Syrian resident and have ties to your land. But at the same token, it doesn't matter where

you live. If you want to help Puerto Rico, you don't even have to be Puerto Rican, as long as you care and you want to help us, we should all welcome anybody who wants to come down and help. I think the criticism was not grounded in any common sense, and it was really more political, and of course he was criticized often about his involvement in Puerto Rico.

ETHIER: Moving into your office's work on immigration. Why was immigration an important issue for your office to focus on?

FUENTES: That was a huge mandate that we had, and we had a lot of people in our community who were victims of a lot of fraudulent services and a lot of victims of lawyers who had not done the service and taken their money. We immediately realized that we had to help them with their [citizenship] applications. We started doing workshops. Then we realized that we had no right to take the application and give it to the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service]. We had to go through a third party. We had no way to know if after we told all those people to come here, and fill out the applications, and we gave them to you—if you were recognized community-based organization [CBO]—that you would give them to the INS and what would happen.

Quickly, we had to adjust our services and figured out, “Well, why can't we do them [submit the applications] ourselves?” I remember going to Doris Meissner's office to talk to her and say, “Hey, so, why can't we be a CBO? Why can't we be submitting our applications ourselves?” And it was so interesting—she was actually the Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service—and she said, “Let me think about it because I don't see any reason why you can't. I'll talk to the lawyers, let me figure it out, but you're right. Why not? If you're doing the quality control, and you're doing the application, why can't I accept them [from you]?”

The agency could not accept the applications from us, because we were not a recognized entity, which at the time was known as CBO, community-based organization. And you know what? We were the first congressional office to be recognized as such because Doris Meissner, an intelligent, talented woman, said, “I see no reason why not.” We received our letter a few months later saying, “Yes, you’re now recognized.” Then we were able to go from beginning to end.

So, as an immigrant you could come to us, we could help you fill out your application, submit it, and then follow through the process directly and say, “What happened to x, and y, z’s application? Why is it taking so long? Did it get lost? The check was cashed, but she didn’t receive a confirmation.” All that stuff we were able to do and throughout the entire existence of the office we did that. We had a very large immigration service in our office, which basically was possibly more than 50 percent of the services we provided to the community.

ETHIER:

I read about the district citizenship days and the community-based organization and I was so fascinated by it. Was there anything special that your office had to do in order to be considered as a CBO or was it just, like, filling out paperwork?

FUENTES:

I don’t remember the details. I remember that we had to follow a certain process, and we had to make sure that there was a way that you filled the applications, and there was a way to submit them—even the way you put the paper in the envelopes, and they were all independently separated and submitted—but it was not anything different than we were doing before when we were giving it to the third party to submit them for us. So, no, that was not really a learning process.

What it did, in fact, was to make us more aggressive about going after the community, and I think we may have helped naturalize more than 60,000 people. I think there might be some digits missing from there. It was a lot more than that, maybe more like 160,000 people.

ETHIER: Wow. It was a tough fight for you, immigration-wise, while you were working in your office, so I'm wondering what kept your office motivated on the subject of immigration.

FUENTES: It's really about the human aspect of it. I think that when you meet these people, and when you see they are suffering by looking into their eyes, and see how, for instance, how grateful they are, you can never forget. I used to sit at the workshops and say, "Next!" They would come in and sit down, and the gratitude—it was amazing. It was like being a doctor. I couldn't believe it. They would cry. I want to cry just thinking about it because you did something as simple as take the time to fill the application, and ask them the questions, and verify them. I'd say, "Okay, sir, we're going to submit this and you're going to hear in a few weeks."

More than once after I said goodbye to a family—because sometimes they would come with the entire family, even if it was just you filling it out, you'll bring your husband and the kids, and everybody will be there at the desk watching everything. This is an important moment. More than once—we would do this in churches or in school auditoriums—more than once after the family left, they would come back, and they would find me, and I'd be like, "Is there something wrong?" He says, "No, no, we just wanted to give you a card, a thank-you card, and flowers." I'm like, "Oh." It was amazing. It was amazing the difference you make in somebody's life. That was the simple stuff.

When the INS would take the unfortunate step of doing raids and deporting women on what would be known as Mexican mother's day, without giving them the opportunity to call a relative and find a safe place for the children to be left with. It was a combination of so many injustices that our community and innocent people were facing that really was enough of an encouragement day in, day out to keep doing the work we did because it was not really easy but it really was right. It was what was right by us as human beings.

I mean, we would often work really long hours—we didn't get paid by hour here. And quite frankly salaries are low. It's not like everybody was paid per hour and putting in overtime by staying in that workshop on a Saturday and a Sunday. But we did it with joy because we knew the need for this community to be protected—rightfully so, because they qualified—and to be empowered. If you are afraid that you're going to get deported just because you don't have your papers—although you have a right to be a legal, permanent resident because you came legally and now you find yourself with the opportunity—but it's either fear or it's that you were the victim of some scam, that they took your papers, and now you don't know how to fix it. That fear is going to keep you in a situation where you just are not participating fully in society, that's very wrong—that you could not have the full American dream that you so deserve because that's why you came to this country.

So, no, none of us—from the caseworkers in the district office, which we had great, great staff, to Luis Gutiérrez, the Congressman himself, and all of us in between—none of us ever, ever, ever, ever waivered. Ever thought that the fight we were fighting for immigrants was not the right call and the right thing to do, because, I mean, who would not want to help the immigrants, the backbone of what has made this country great since day one?

ETHIER: Wow. Thank you.

FUENTES: You're welcome.

ETHIER: As a Member of Congress, Gutiérrez planned some moments of civil disobedience, getting arrested a number of times.

FUENTES: Yes. Indeed.

ETHIER: Were you part of that planning and what were those days like in the office?

FUENTES: Well, you know, those days were always—especially the first time—it was always interesting to wonder, “Is he going to get hurt? How long is this going to take? Are we going to see him again?” {laughter} Now that I think back it's funny, but back in the day it wasn't very funny. I remember being scared for him. I mean, we're talking about a guy who's not big. He's not huge and I'm thinking what if they throw him in the van and don't properly make sure that he is transported from the White House after getting arrested to the center where he's going to be processed?

The first time was the scariest time because we didn't know how long it would take, or what would happen, or if he would sleep in jail. We didn't know. But I think it happened a few times and by the last time—we obviously had to go bail him out, right? We assumed it was going to take a lot longer, and the point is that he got out before we got there. He's like, “Where are you?” And it's like, “Oh, you're out?” It's like, “Oh! Sorry. We're on our way. We were not rushing, because we thought we had time. We're going to go stop for coffee. But sorry, we'll be right there.” {laughter}

So, yes, there was a whole process that in the beginning it took a long time, we were scared, and by the third time we were like, “Okay, sorry we're late to

pick you up.” It was a journey. I never got arrested with him, but I know other staff that made the choice to sit down with him in civil disobedience and got arrested with him. Somebody had to drive them back, {laughter} so I did.

ETHIER: I’m wondering what sort of reputation you had on the Hill as a Gutiérrez staffer and if his activism shaped the way that other staff members viewed you and your colleagues here.

FUENTES: Oh, goodness. I don’t know how people viewed me. I guess you’d have to ask that question to some other people who may remember me. But I know that, yes, I could tell you that one of my associates at work today was here as a younger man and I think what he has said about what he thought of me at the time was that he thought that I was intimidating, {laughter} which I think is hilarious. There was that.

And then some people thought I was attractive. I remember there was a year that I was one of the 50 most attractive people or most beautiful, whatever the name of that thing was. I think it was *The Hill* or *Roll Call* has this silly contest. So, yes, I was number 38.

ETHIER: Wow.

FUENTES: I don’t know if that means that there were 37 better looking people before me and there was about 12 uglier people than me, but yes, I was in the 30s, so hey. {laughter} I think I may have been in my 30s too. Who knows?

ETHIER: We have, oh, about 25 minutes left and I have some reflection questions that I want to get to, but first I want to talk about the CHC [Congressional Hispanic Caucus]. I guess just quickly what purpose did it serve here on the Hill and what was your involvement in it?

FUENTES: The Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the Institute, which is the nonprofit arm, they're really important because they are the caucus that pulls all the Members who are Hispanic—and their friends because it's not only for Hispanics—together to protect and promote the agenda for our community. Sometimes they can be united and vote as a block.

The nonprofit aspect of it, the 501(c)(3), which is the Institute, is a wonderful idea that basically brings a lot of young people to the Hill. It's been in practice for the longest time and they raise money so that people can have the opportunity to be interns or fellows and understand how this building works, how we do what we do, why we do it, and be part of the process so that eventually they could even come back as Members or as full time staff and be inspired to make a difference. The opportunity to come to CHCI—it's that door that opens for the communities across the states [where it] would be difficult to access [the Hill]. With the help of the CHCI they can actually come here. I got to tell you as somebody who dealt with all those interns, they're very well selected. I never had an issue with any of the CHCI interns.

ETHIER: Did you, as a staff member for the Resident Commissioners but also for Gutiérrez, work with the CHC at all?

FUENTES: Yes, we did. In fact we had weekly meetings where we would talk about the agenda and we would figure out next steps when Congress was in session. It's a very, very active caucus. It meets—at least when I was here—it meets very regularly. It used to.

ETHIER: Great. Okay, moving into sort of the reflection questions—unless there's anything else you want to say about the Congressional Hispanic Caucus?

FUENTES: No. They have enough people talking about it. {laughter}

ETHIER: What do you think women staff and women Members bring to the institution that is different than men?

FUENTES: Women by nature are caretakers. I think we are built to be mothers and to give birth. I think that what happens is that even if you didn't give birth to anyone, I think you carry that in you. I think you carry that sense of family, that sense of protection, that sense of community. I'm not saying that men don't bring that—but I'm saying that for us I think it's maybe more enhanced. I think we have a different—I don't want to say better—but maybe we have an advantage when it comes to something difficult like negotiation, and like dealing with a difficult situation because, again, not necessarily that it's better, but it's more advantageous. I think it comes with our sense of being a woman and having obviously a different constitution, a different set of how our brain works. Even our stomachs are different. Men carry an enzyme that women don't, which is why they can drink more alcohol than we can and process it better. I think the same goes for other things. I think our sense of what it takes to deal with a difficult situation and how we carry it out, it may very well be very different than the way men would deal with it.

I think we also don't have that macho thing, you know? I think for us it's a different thing that would make us proud in how we walked away from that negotiation. And, again, I'm not saying that it's any better, because we need men every day of our life. I think that, not being a psychologist or a sociologist, but being a woman and watching how we have all dealt—from all my sisters who have been chiefs of staff—because we had to deal with situations every day—I've seen how we respond and react to things, and how the same situation, it goes very different with men. So, again, I think we have a built-in advantage in certain aspects of it, right? It's also very unlikely that

we'll end up in a fistfight {laughter} when we're negotiating. But having said that I think that we can pound the table just as good as any man.

I love being a woman. And I love that as a woman in Congress I was able to do so much. I think that it sometimes—especially back in the culture of the day when I started—there is nothing wrong with them expecting very little of you when you went into the room. I think it can work to your advantage. If you're still of a mindset that a woman walking into the room it's an advantage to you, I think that that will be to your disadvantage.

ETHIER: I'm wondering, similar to what you were just saying, if there was a time you were really angry, either because someone wasn't listening to you, or something wasn't getting through, how you dealt with anger in your job?

FUENTES: I was angry often when things didn't go right. In my 20 years, I wasn't angry often because I had a great working situation working for a great boss. But when I became a chief of staff things got more complicated because my life got more absorbed with the Hill. There were a lot more things going on and I remember that there were times that it was very difficult to balance the hours with your personal life. I mean, at that time I was married, I had my family. I had vacations. I remember wanting to help with a family member in a surgery, and it was hard not to be able to be there when you knew you had to be here because obviously, sometimes you have to. Sometimes you don't really have that choice.

How did I deal with anger? Well you know what? I picked up yoga. {laughter} I figured that breathing, and stretching, and following whatever those ancestral and previous civilizations did to prolong their life could be a good idea. So I did. I picked up hot yoga and I think that was very good. Definitely better than picking up the bottle. {laughter}

ETHIER: What do you think will be your lasting legacy?

FUENTES: Generally speaking?

ETHIER: Yes, for your time in Congress.

FUENTES: My legacy in Congress is very intertwined with Luis Gutiérrez's legacy because it was 20 of the 25 years that I worked with him, for him, and for our Fourth Congressional District. When I think back, it's all the work that we did for the immigrant community, all the families that we helped stay together, all the good people that we were able to defend and protect and that today are U.S. citizens. They were able to carry their dream from beginning to end. I think that by itself would be enough and there was still a lot more that we did.

Then the second legacy was all the work that we did to help, not just the immigrant community but the Puerto Rican population here in the States and even those from Puerto Rico who sometimes felt that we could help them by being in Congress because of x, y, and z, and so we did. So without being very specific, I think it's those two communities that we served pretty much every day in very good ways and we were able to see the product at the end of the day that made me most proud and that I have carried on in my work now in the private sector.

ETHIER: Was there anything unexpected or something that surprised you about your time in the House?

FUENTES: One of the things that surprised me—there's a funny one and one not so funny. One of the things that surprised me when I first got here was that you only got paid once a month. {laughter} I never heard of that before. I kept thinking, "Well, I guess I have to budget myself because if I run out of

money before the 30th what am I going to do?” So there was that. I thought that was interesting.

Then what I thought was not so funny was that when I got here there weren't any of those employer-employee protections that normally you would have in terms of working overtime, instances of working under conditions that maybe weren't the best because maybe the room was dark, because there were so many boxes that you could hurt yourself, or even as many people now know in terms of harassment policies. When you were asking around to see, “Okay, so, excuse me, I've been working 10 hours every day. What am I going to do?” There was nothing you could do. That you would make very little money and not have any way to compensate for all those hours, that caught my attention because we were an institution that made the laws and somehow the laws didn't apply to all of us equally in the building. That was the downside of something I didn't know existed at the time. That changed, and I think continues to improve in the building, but when I got here in 1988 that wasn't the case. Now getting paid once a month is still the case, I believe.

ETHIER: It is. {laughter} I'm wondering how technology changed the way that Capitol Hill communicated with their districts and also maybe Puerto Rico, too. So, the change in technology over time.

FUENTES: When I got to work in Congress we had no cell phones. We had no internet. We had no email. I mean, everything came very slowly. I remember we had faxes. There were some typewriters sometimes. We had a computer, but it was just not the same. There were no tablets. There was no 4G, so if you were in the car you were not—it was flip phones when we started having them, but I remember the satellite phone.

[Technology] made a difference. It made everything more immediate. It also created more work. But it made communications between Puerto Rico and Chicago and DC a lot more efficient. It was a win in spite of some of the lack of privacy that it all entails, and intrusion into your private life and also your personal time. Now it seems like we are working around the clock, so there is no longer that respect that, “Well, I’m going on vacation. I’ll see you next Friday or next Monday.” There is no such thing—you don’t disconnect. So this may be too much of a good thing {laughter} to have so much communication. But I think at the end of the day all that did help us with our work for our constituents and in the district. Absolutely it was a plus.

ETHIER: Why is it important for women of color to be chiefs of staff?

FUENTES: I think it’s important for women of color to be chiefs of staff because of the others that are watching, mostly other women of color, especially young women of color, who I think sometimes feel that perhaps they’re not included, or maybe should not be included, or maybe will not be included. I think it’s important that when people see others who look like you up there running the show that you say, “Ah, I can do it too and maybe she can open the door for me,” which I think it’s super important. In my case it was a man {laughter} and it was men who opened the door, right, but I think it’s important that more women get to the seat of power and get to the peak so that others, they can pave the way. Even if it’s not directly, indirectly by people looking up and saying, “Well, I could be just like her.” I think that that’s important.

ETHIER: And lastly how did the Hill prepare you for what you do now?

FUENTES: Well, now that I’m a consultant and also run a nonprofit that helps Puerto Ricans and the States, I think work that I did here prepared me every day for

what I do now because I dealt with the Puerto Rican communities day in, day out, on the mainland. I dealt with stakeholders in Puerto Rico, and in Chicago, and in New York, and in California. I knew what the needs were, and I knew what the issues were, and I knew how I could maybe help in the process once I moved on. So it's been a continuation, but from a different perspective and from a different place. Yet even to this day I still work with Puerto Rico and to help Puerto Rico, especially after Hurricane Maria. With my team, one of our efforts and key on our agenda is to make sure that we continue to foster Puerto Rico's economic growth, which is so important for helping Puerto Rico fully recover from the total destruction that Hurricane Maria created.

ETHIER: Those are all of the prepared questions I have. Is there anything else you want to say that we didn't cover?

FUENTES: I know you asked me about who my female mentors were, and I think that I had to also speak about a male mentor because I think that in my case it was just a male mentor that did so much for me in my life, and that was Congressman Luis Gutiérrez. Through our 20 years of work history together we became friends and today we're friends. I don't work for him. I don't work with him. When we get together it's like old friends getting together. We can laugh and talk about the past. When I met him I was a young woman still in my early 20s who really had not been seasoned in the ways of the world and politics. I think that the way that the two previous men in Congress that I worked for had run the office was very different to the way that Congressman Gutiérrez was running the team.

I immediately felt not only this kinship but that there was this protection, not just physically—I knew nothing wrong would happen to me while I worked for him, but about my professional value added and what I can bring

to the process. I don't think it's an accident. He has two daughters, and he's a husband and a father. I think that Soraida, Omaira, and Jessica, the women in his family, kind of created this great man for women, who not only pushes you to do your best and mentors you until the end but protects you and makes you feel that you're important. I think that as a woman who— basically my entire professional life I was with him when you think of it, because I don't think in my two previous incidences I was able to basically grow fully and be totally in the peak of my abilities as a manager, as a tactician, as a strategist, and he allowed that and celebrated that.

One of the most important things about Luis Gutiérrez is that he made sure through my entire journey with him that I was treated like a lady but paid like a man. He paid me like a man. I remember the day that he picked up the phone and said, "How much can I pay you?" I was already chief of staff. He said, "How much can I pay you? What's the maximum?" I said, "I don't know. I'm going to find out right away." {laughter} So I call, I said, "It's that." And he goes, "Do it." And I said, "Really?" He says, "I think it's important that people see because if that's what other male chiefs of staff are making in this building why are you not making the same?" I said, "Well, I agree." So there we go. That's the way also it was for my replacement. He also made sure that that happened and it was a woman who replaced me. So I think that Luis Gutiérrez remained in my legacy as possibly the most important mentor I had. I think he showed me that you could be strong and still wear pink, which he did. {laughter}

ETHIER: I love that.

FUENTES: No, it was fantastic. I will be forever grateful for the opportunity. The gift of a lifetime for having worked in this building, this wonderful institution that is the United States Congress, even today in the day that we live in, and to

have been working for him, a man who protected and cherished working with women. It was a fabulous time and I'll look back—on my deathbed—as the highlight, one of the highlights of my life for sure.

ETHIER:

Great. Thank you so much for your time and everything.