

Eugene Lareau interviewed by Jay Mercado
October 22, 2018
Inwood, NY

Jay Mercado - How you doing sir? Good evening.

Eugene Lareau - Good evening.

JM- Would you like to say your full name to the audience please?

EL - Eugene Lareau

JM- Today I will be interviewing you about things that happened in the past. I will be asking you questions about the neighborhood that you've been living in, what are things that have changed, things that you have noticed that have happened in the past. I want to started off with you telling us, like, a little bit about the background, what you notice about what has changed throughout the neighborhood, and like some difference that you have seen.

EL - Alright. When I grew up, we had three movie theaters. We had the Loew's, RKO, and a small independent theater. And, the audience changed for movies and they went out of business. The other thing that happened, during the summertime we used to go to the amusement park. It was the site of the black players, the stadium and that was there but that was torn down and the projects were built. That was the 1st major change. They went up in the early fifties. That's right by the Subway at Dyckman.

JM- That's really nice to hear. So the first question that I have, why did the residents of this neighborhood decide to leave the society? So like back then the people that used to live here why did they decide to leave?

EL - I think they decided to leave because the co-ops that were being built the big developments that were happening in Queens. A lot of Irish left. They got better jobs as fireman and policeman and they left.

JM- So they decided to move on for something better.

EL - They decided to move on to Queens.

JM- What was the journey to New York City like?

EL - My parents came from... They left for economic and political reasons. My mother grew up during the Irish Civil War, an uprising that was put down by the English. There was constant terror between different groups and the English and so they decided to come here. My father's parents came from Canada, from Montreal because of economic hardship and that's why they came to New York looking for work.

JM- So basically a better life, a better future.

EL - A better future, yes.

JM - So the next question I would like to ask you today would be how would they be received upon arriving, in their neighborhood specifically and how in the United States in general?

EL - They came here after World War II, and this neighborhood was all Irish. 99% Irish. My mother came as result of chain migration. She had nine brothers and two sisters and they came and the whole neighborhood was Irish. Good Shepherd Parish was Irish. So you came into a neighborhood where you already fit in. At that point also the country was doing very well after World War II so we had a good foundation for living and we had a new school built by the archdiocese - Our Lady Queen of Martyrs. I transferred from public school to parochial school. And it was a good place to live with parks and playgrounds and everything.

JM-So it was a good area?

EL - It was a very calm area

JM- How did the neighborhood change and how did they feel about it?

EL - When I was a kid we had different places you could go. You could go down to the river, there was a ferry from Dyckman Street to Alpine, New Jersey so you could go for picnics, for hiking. There was also a small plane strip where you could take out small planes. We had Inwood Hill Park where we'd go to play. Once the projects were built and it was nice. At that point I was going to college. The Irish started moving out because there were new developments throughout Brooklyn and Queens and I noticed at that point there was a radical shift in the neighborhood. For the first time you saw black people.

JM- What year was this?

EL - I don't remember. But I remember one particular incident that gave me a personal experience. I was swimming in the George Washington High School pool. I was just about to go in and a group of Irish thugs threw me in the deep water and the next thing I heard - I was drowning - was a man's voice and he said "are you in trouble man" and I said "yes" and he pulled me out. It was a black man. So that was the first black person I had experience with. So when everything came along I could not understand my father's attitude... it was the old fashioned attitude of white people didn't like black people. I never understood that because a black person saved my life.

JM- It's like the way things are going now with a racist thing with white people not liking black people or even black people hating their own people. You were able to experience something really good - not even that he saved your life, but you could see how kind people could be and it's not like how people out there make it seem. As if they were bad people and they only do bad stuff.

EL - Yes it was. I saw them as human beings. I don't... the only thing I remember was that a black man saved my life and the people who threw me in the pool were white, so my attitude was c'mon... my father couldn't understand my enthusiasm for civil rights, Martin Luther King and what was going on, but I was shaped by my experiences.

JM- In general how has the neighborhood changed? Like since your parents arrived here what was the big thing that changed after they were arrived?

EL - The big thing was the introduction of the Dyckman projects and the change of the racial makeup of the neighborhood. It made no difference to me, but I think that at the same time there were all these other developments in Brooklyn and Queens and the Irish started moving out. A lot of white people started moving out and then I think someone intervened in the Dominican Republic and then Dominican

immigrants started coming over and the neighborhood started having more and more of a Hispanic... and the neighborhood started going that way so it became like a little Santo Domingo.

JM- Nowadays they call it little DR, that's what they call it, but has the recession in the neighborhood and in the United States more generally changed over time?

EL - I think the Dominicans made this a different neighborhood. Culturally, everything. The only thing that we didn't have when I grew up was the situation with the drugs and the drug dealers and the violence. And that's the only thing that I lament now. We're not so bad where I live but other areas are more dangerous than this neighborhood.

JM- So what has changed? What does the experience tell us about New York and the United States?

EL - I think it tells us a lot because we are a nation of immigrants. I never forgot what John Eisenhower said. He was the son of President Eisenhower. He said, "I don't understand why people have this attitude because 1/3 of the United States was stolen from Mexico." 7 or 8 states used to be part of Mexico and President Polk provoked an attack to use as a justification for taking half of Mexico. And also, we came and took it away from the Indians.

JM- So a lot of people don't see like, one, basically they took over most of the lands of the Indian people had and basically Mexico, people don't see it that way nowadays. They will talk about it and know that they did it but it doesn't have any impact basically because nowadays with the new president that we have and the new laws that are coming up people don't see how we took a big percent of land from Mexico. And they don't see it that way because you see how we're going now with immigration and Trump's trying to build this wall and the border to separate Mexico from the United States

EL - Most people don't know that the great migration that occurred after World War II was caused by the lynching of thousands of Blacks... human beings in the South and most people are ignorant of American history. I think there's an element of society that is afraid of change and that's throughout the whole world. I read something in the paper the other day where some people think that Europe may become black in 100 years, that three out of every five people are going to be black because the African birth rate is higher and all these areas of people are dying off and things are changing. I welcome that change.

JM- To move on to something more specific and it has to do more with our nation, the United States, what have been or what have you experienced or saw any violence, conflict, natural disaster, or political turn that has caused a big impact in society in the country and has made changes?

EL - I think that the export of American jobs, the outsourcing of American jobs, has caused deep unemployment and unrest and bewilderment among the whites in the Midwest and the dying of the coal industry. What has changed has made them more receptive to Trump's playing on their insecurities and hatred. The money that they spend on the military should be spent on the education of the people. We should train all those people who don't have any skills. Every human being has the right to a job and housing. But the way capitalism is going now... like in our city the rents keep going up and up and up. The rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer.

JM- What do you think the Trujillo assassination did. Even though it happened in the Dominican Republic... But you also had some of his people like military getting visas to come to the United States and basically being able to being welcome to the United States because of the things that they have done in the Dominican Republic because of being part of the military

EL - I think the United States invaded the Dominican Republic. That's when the immigration came from the Dominican Republic and more... it was chain migration. They were welcomed. Open immigration policy. Now the Trump thing is a closed immigration policy.

JM- So it has changed

EL -Dramatically, yes. I don't know what's happening in El Salvador or Honduras that causes 7 to 10,000 people to get in a caravan and walk thousands of miles to a better life, but this is the reality of what's happening right now. Europe is faced with all the immigrants from Africa because of climate change because of lack of food famine political unrest. It's a reality that the world has to deal with.

JM- So everything has come to reality now. Going back to 1989. I don't know if you have any knowledge or if you have any experience. Help how was it back then? Jobs, violence in society, let's bring the topic up. Nowadays our communities are full of drug dealers and stuff like that period, but how was it back then?

EL -That's when drug dealing started in earnest, in the eighties. Part of the problem is that drugs are illegal and that's not the solution. This is the wrong policy. I don't know what the policy should be with drugs, but the whole mass incarceration system is just wrong. The criminal justice system is wrong. The tax cut that was given to the rich should have been put into the schools and into intervention in the schools from pre-K stage so you change people's lives, common you give them a better base for a better life and a family. We don't have that now. But we're gonna have to do that because everyone has to be integrated into society.

JM- What you believe and what you suggest in the future basically now is that everybody should be involved not just necessarily the money people certain amount of race. Because you know the United States basically separates people by race. Not all see it that way but people at higher levels in the power that they have power they seated a different way so they basically separate us from being black, being Hispanic, white, it depends on where you come from, so they divide us in basically different percentages to see how many you have in this community and how many you have a different States and what basically is the background that's been there before.

EL - We are all one. The use race to divide people to accumulate power and money and to control people. Make the immigrant your foe he takes your job he takes your benefits. Like Trump said that there are criminals and terrorists in that caravan. There are no criminals. And they are no terrorists. The ICE Agents have a report on the caravan... No one in there is a criminal. There are a few maybe but they are not hundreds and hundreds of criminals and terrorists.

JM- That's crazy. You see how the neighborhood looks now. New things that are coming in, restaurants new buildings are being builds. So basically we're going into gentrification. During the eighties and nineties and even in the early two-thousands how was it? The buildings, restaurants, businesses around here. How has it improved nowadays?

EL - One thing I forgot to say is we also had a very high concentration of Jewish people here who were wealthy and fortunate enough to escape Nazi Germany. Let's just say a quarter... was Jewish. Jewish neighborhoods, Jewish schools, synagogues, so it was a homogeneous group and I knew everybody in my building by their first name. People were much more friendly, and it was a different society because we didn't have air conditioning and we left our doors open. Fully open. We didn't lock our doors until the mid-sixties. I'm serious. You left the door open because there was no air conditioning and you needed the draft to go back-and-forth. The other thing happening now, the city government decided that this

neighborhood does not belong to you. They can make money and they can gentrify and they just permitted major development in the area, like East of the train tracks. I remember when Pathmark, there used to be two on 7th street, went out of business... Tow brothers or Taconic bought it and they said they're not buying it for a supermarket but they're buying it because they know eventually they're going to own a huge block of real estate and that's what's going to happen. I think maybe not in my lifetime but eventually this entire neighborhood's going to have tall buildings and be for the rich.

JM- Me personally I feel that way because this is how things are changing. Basically people that are living in this neighborhood for a long time are actually getting money to move out by the landlords so I basically think that knowing that it's gentrification and the bringing new stores and companies that were never in the neighborhood and restaurants you never thought you would see around here... new things coming in the hood basically I basically see it as not only that it was and is Little DR, but over time it's going to be for the rich people.

EL - yeah, for the super-rich and for the upper middle class like everybody jokes Trader Joe or Aldi or Whole Foods is gonna open here soon, which I would welcome.

JM - Yeah, you'd welcome Whole Foods I know

EL - Not Whole Foods, that's a whole paycheck. I shop at Aldi, which owns Trader Joe's. Up on 231st street. They're very reasonable. They got everything Trader Joe's does. I forgot to say the other change was the Jewish element. There were so many bakeries, so many delicatessens, we had bakeries on every block, like they say the Irish when they came in they brought bars on every block but every block was a bakery. You could get fresh bread. And that's something that changed too. Change goes both ways.

JM - So change can go bad and good sometimes. But actually going back to the immigrants, what year and what time was it that immigrants had a huge impact to the neighborhood to the country. When did immigration become like a high status kind of a thing.

EL - Immigrants built this country. When the interborough rapid transit company - this is what Trump and Steve Bannon seem to be ignorant of - when the interborough rapid transit company built the IRT, they put ads for people to do underground construction. People all over the world came here and they were welcome here. And that's why we have Chinatown. And the Irish came, and the Italians came. And the Germans came. And the Jewish people came into New York City. The new wave, not the old wave from 1900 - 1910. They came because of political reasons and because of their situation and they were welcomed.

JM - Is there anything you wanna add to this interview?

EL - From a personal point of view, I guess the Irish displaced the Jews and they came in and they co-mingled and we used to go to the Jewish bakeries, we used to go to the Jewish butchers, and it was an integrated neighborhood. And then the Spanish came and the black people came from different parts... big mix like New York like the United States. Right now I think what's happening is that it's becoming gentrified and the new developments will make this neighborhood very very rich neighborhood.

JM - So like I was telling you the beginning of the interview and throughout the middle basically gentrification is what's going on

EL - And we have no control

JM - No, we don't.

EL - The way of the world

JM - It's like they say, another day, another dollar.

EL – Yes

JM - That's a point I could make right now
Were there any questions I didn't ask that I should have asked?

EL - No. You covered everything. I'm happy you interviewed me.

JM - It was nice to interview you and getting to know things that I didn't know about this neighborhood back then. But now I'm proud that I know new things about what it was like back then because of you. Thank you very much.