



Storytellers @RPL

Interviewee: Liz Llorente

Interviewee: EJ Aguado

Facilitator: Sarah Kiefer

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SARAH: My name is Sarah Kiefer. Today is September 30, 2016, speaking with Liz Llorente and EJ Aguado. We are recording this interview in the Bolger Heritage Center of the Ridgewood Public Library.

EJ: How did you come to live in Ridgewood and when?

LIZ: Well, I was expecting you, my son, and we were at the time--your father and I were living in another part of Bergen County. We were renting, and we wanted a place that had good schools and was safe and nice. So we looked pretty much all around North Jersey, and at probably no less than 100 homes. And we finally saw a few homes in Ridgewood, and I looked up the information about the school's quality of life, and it just seemed to have all the things that I was looking for, you know, all the things that I would want in a town for raising a family. And the housing market at the time was actually a buyers' market, which is great. So there was a couple that was retired, and they were looking to simplify and they sold us the house. And we moved in in March, and you were born in June. So. And so that's where, that's how we came to live in Ridgewood.

EJ: How long have you been a resident?

LIZ: Well, I lived here from 1991 until actually earlier this year 2016. And it'll always be my hometown, no matter where I am cause I actually lived here for most of my life—it's the town that I've lived in the longest, so...and so, what--now EJ, you lived here all your life really. What was it, like what would you say the best things were about growing up here?

EJ: The schools were good, in retrospect--it prepared me for college in a way that I didn't really expect, like senior year. My senior year of classes at Ridgewood High School were harder than some of my freshman and sophomore year classes at college. At the time, obviously you don't appreciate that, the difficulty.

LIZ: At the time, did you think, “oh, they’re too tough.”

EJ: Yeah, at the time, you’re like, you’re just trying to graduate and go to college. You don’t think really appreciate the challenges for second semester seniors, looking forward to the summer, but, later on you look back and you appreciate that.

And the safety of the town also— it’s a big thing. I never really felt, like, in danger or anything--going out with my friends, biking all over the place, and things like that that you don’t really appreciate until you go to other places where you realize, like, okay, well, maybe it’s a little sketchier to be out late at night, or whatever. It’s just a good community and, I guess, you appreciate a lot more looking back on it than you did at the time. But I will always consider this, obviously, my hometown, as well.

LIZ: Yeah, well, I remember thinking also, “Wow, they give a lot of work and teachers are pretty demanding...”

EJ: Oh, yeah, well, the schools are tough, you don’t think about it, you have nothing to compare it to. And when you get to college, I went to a school with over 90% of the people from Jersey, and when I get there, you realize, oh, like, we’re almost on a different level than a lot of people from even your own state. And like New Jersey, decent education throughout the state, but Ridgewood is on another tier, and that definitely helps prepare people for the future. You’ve talked on how you appreciate the Ridgewood school system, and how do you feel that helps shape the community?

LIZ: Well, I think it, I think the kids, no matter really what walk of life they come from-- because Ridgewood has a diversity beyond what most people realize, socioeconomically and ethnically and racially – I think that pretty much Ridgewood does a quite impressive job of turning out kids who are polished, really, very polished, and pretty confident, and I think they graduate kids practically ready to do well in a job interview, even from senior year of high school. So I think that is a great advantage, not only in college, but later on in the working world, just, you know, how you come across, how you carry yourself.

Like I said, I remember all the homework, and I thought, well, it’s a lot of homework. But, I think it paid off, and I think a lot of the kids in Ridgewood also graduate—the schools turn out kids who are pretty good writers, which is really important, no matter what you do cause you either have to write reports-- writing is always a part of whatever you do in life, no matter what career you go into. And now, even the way you express yourself in an email, you know, if you’re writing to a boss or a client or something, I mean that creates an impression. And I remember the counselors in school being very cooperative, very encouraging parents to get involved, and they were truly, truly interested in forming a partnership, you know, for education.

And one of the things that I’m very impressed about, EJ, is that the some of the friends that you had from the time you were a kid who I remember, you know, as very small

children, seeing for the first time here in Ridgewood, became also good friends as adults. And I see them now and I have to do a double take cause they're men and businessmen and you're all still good friends and you're not even just good friends with them--you actually have them as roommates, and you still like one another. So talk to you about that, that bond.

EJ: Yeah, I mean, it's unique. I'd say the core group of my friends, still to this day, are all kids I went to Ridgewood High School with. And I feel like, growing up, like again, going back to just being able to--we hung out in summers, like some of my better memories are just, in the summer, we'd go to Graydon every single day, and bike all over creation, and go play sports, go play basketball, and do all this stuff that Ridgewood offers, in a sense of, like, in a sense of community and a sense of, you know, safety. Like, I'm sure you're not worried about me, if I'm like, 15 years old and I'm biking around and playing sports all day for 10 hours in the summer. Growing up in Ridgewood is different than other places cause you're not too concerned-- you know, like, he's safe, he's not somewhere too far away. And, you know, just that pact that we formed at a young age, like still, with a lot of my friends, we're still great friends.

LIZ: And around Thanksgiving, I know a lot of you get together and always have...

EJ: Well, around Thanksgiving in general, pretty much in any town, it's like a high school reunion. But, especially, we always get together. We go to the Office Bar and Grill Wednesday night before Thanksgiving, and yeah...

LIZ: And just have sodas...

EJ: Yeah, just sodas and water, of course. But, yeah, people still, I mean we love coming back here. You know, at the time, it's funny, cause when you graduate college, you come home, and then you're home for a little while til you get a job or whatever. You're like, aw, you know, I'm ready to get out, like, I'll move somewhere, blah, blah, ... And then you move somewhere, and you move out—like, I live in Hudson County now, and coming back here, it's a lot of fun now. It's like, oh, man, it's like everything's so--this is so different but this is the same, I miss this place. So, it's like a novelty now, and it's kinda cool.

LIZ: And that's something, too. It's like, now that I live in another part of Bergen County, in Oakland, which is not that far away and Oakland has its own special qualities, but Ridgewood--I come back, I feel nostalgic for it, and I've only been gone for a few months.

EJ: Right.

LIZ: But I think, oh my goodness, all these restaurants—it's got more than 72 restaurants...

EJ: And a lot of it is, like I said earlier, it's like, in hindsight, you know, you don't

appreciate it as much when you're in it cause it's every day, and then you leave and you know. OK, like, I miss this, I miss that, I miss this—and you don't really realize how good you have it in this town. You really do. My girlfriend, when we started dating, she would come here and say she felt like she was on vacation when she was here.

LIZ: In Ridgewood?

EJ: Yeah.

LIZ: And she's from South Jersey.

EJ: Yeah, she's from a nice suburb in South Jersey, but Ridgewood is just a very unique, special place.

LIZ: Yeah, yeah, it's very sophisticated, it offers a lot of cultural activity—the concerts in the field, at Vets Field in the summer, and also I remember one of the perks, too, is that, some of the people who perform are people from Ridgewood who also happen to be on Broadway, right? And so you get that. Also, there's so much talent—so many of the residents of Ridgewood have talent and are in the theater in New York and just give of their time to give back to Ridgewood. And the people who are here for that are just the beneficiaries of that. And also, so many people—I remember also when I lived here and friends would want to get together and since I was here all the time, I'd think, “Oh, where we gonna meet for lunch.” ‘Let's meet in Ridgewood.’ “Oh, but I wanta to get out of Ridgewood, I want to go somewhere else.” But they wanted to go, because it was so, it was just cool to come to Ridgewood, right? So now I'm one of those people, So yeah....and so...it really is, again, and I'm I'm, I'm just impressed and I know that Madison, your girlfriend, said the same thing-- she said, “You know, she says, I really admire the fact that this group of friends from Ridgewood just have such a bond and are still, you know, close” and even those who weren't your roommates still join you for going to the beach in the summer, staying in a house in the summer. It's not just your roommates, but it's a wider group of friends.

EJ: Right, yeah, we have a big, a big group of friends, again, most of us can trace our roots to Ridgewood, and those of us who can't, know each other from somebody who can. So, like, you met through mutual friends who knew somebody from Ridgewood, but, yeah, my whole group of friends is pretty much can trace our roots back to Ridgewood. I don't know--it is unique, it's definitely unique, because I know so many people who barely keep in touch with college friends, let alone high school friends. And we've been able to, it's funny because we all actually, like, a bunch of us moved into the Jersey City, Hoboken, New York City area and now, like, all of us are there. And like somebody will have a party, and everyone will come, and it's, like, you know, it's like the same, you're seeing the same faces. Obviously, you know, you lose people here and there, you don't see them for a while-- but over, you know, in general terms, the same group has been together for so long. Like I said, you don't really realize how unique and special it is until somebody who's an outsider says, like, “Oh, you have a really big group of friends—you have a big crew of people who are close together or,

like, live close to each other still,” and have been close for a long time. And then I think about it, and, you know what, yeah, we do. And it's unique, it's special, it's awesome, and it's, you know, lifelong relationships that came out of this town.

LIZ: Yeah, yeah. And another thing that I was recalling, and I tell people about Ridgewood that I don't see in other places--I'm sure it exists in other places but it's not, it's so rare that you don't see it--is just how much into fitness people are in this town. I mean, almost no matter the weather, you see people all hours of the day running, walking, I've seen senior citizens just walking even hand-in-hand just to get that exercise in. Sometimes you can't even go two blocks without seeing somebody running. And it could be almost 100° , it could be noon, you know, and you just see that. And, for me, it was always motivating. So, if I just didn't feel like working out that day, all I would need to do is drive to get coffee and I'd feel guilty, you know, because of all the people I'd pass running like that.

And, there are so many places to exercise, too. You could do it around, you could just run around town or walk around town or the duck pond-- you could walk around there, there's a trail, you know, that goes through several towns. There is also the track around Vets Field—that was my favorite. I would go around there and try to, I'd tell myself, I'm gonna do three or four laps, and then I'd get encouraged, and, again, it was because other people were walking or running. And I remember one time there was a woman, elderly woman walking-- walking with a cane, and she was walking around in her Sunday best, that she was walking around and I was running and I felt tired and I looked at her, and I thought, “You know, she's walking with a cane. I better keep going, because I have no excuse.” And she gave me a thumbs up and she said, “You go” one of those times that I passed her, and I said, “Well, I admire you,” and, you know, I gave her a thumbs up, and so, I just thought, this is great.

And so I miss that, actually, that now I have to—it's either the gym, this one gym that I joined, but there's not really, there aren't all those open spaces, these places that are more inviting. What about you?

EJ: Well, the town, yeah, Ridgewood is very conducive to being in good health in terms of just scenery, too—it's like, there's a lot of nice scenery to run. Living in an urban area, you miss running amongst trees and fields, as opposed to buildings and cars and asphalt. But also, there's a lot of healthy places to eat—they do a good job in the schools—I still remember some of the stuff that I was taught in wellness class in high school. And some of the programs that we used to have, like, after school, and things for people to get in shape. And they value that importance and a lot of people do buy into it, you know, a lot of students buy into it, which is good. It's a culture, and it's a culture of good health, there's a lot of healthy places to eat downtown and that's important.

LIZ: Well, and you have said a few times, you said, “You know, I'd like to come back and live here later.” Do you still feel that way?

EJ: Yeah, I mean, paycheck pending (laughter), you know. I would love to live in Ridgewood eventually and raise a family here. I think Ridgewood sets a high bar for students and for the kids in the community. And I think that I benefited greatly from being in a situation where I grew up here and, you know, even, not to sound arrogant, but, like even the people who like struggled in school whatever, everybody—I feel like the bar was just set so high, but the floor was so high like, even people who I thought, you know, didn't care about school and stuff, are having great professional careers now. It's crazy to look back and, be like, a lot of people succeeded coming out of this town. And I don't think that's a coincidence—I think it's because people are more driven, the goals are higher, and I think it's a good place to raise kids and a good place. A lot of good examples are set here, and a lot of-- I just think, yeah, it's a lot of people are driven and the goals, you know, going into high school, going in the high school early, like, you know, get into a good college-- it's very good goals and I feel like they give you the resources you need to succeed and how you want to succeed. And I think it's a good place to grow up and I think I have a lot of advantages in my adult life that were built from the foundation of growing up here. And I would love for my kids to have that same opportunity.

LIZ: And we have, actually, a lot of very interesting residents who, like, members of the Goya family-- Goya Latino food-- and one of the brothers, the founding family lived in Ridgewood, and his sons, right, went to school with you, and so that's a family that everyone knows, in fact, all around the world.

And many famous writers, some of the leading executives for major news corporations in New York call Ridgewood home. And, so, we're in good company.

One of the things I'd love to see Ridgewood have someday is sort of like a communitywide networking event, because there's so many people here who succeeded, right? And wouldn't it be great if they could meet one another. Like, when I go to a convention, you know, there'll be a job fair, there will be companies with different stands, and I think, you know, Ridgewood itself could do something like this. And so the younger people, maybe, who are just trying to get started, or people who are between jobs or something, the community is so rich and there are so many great connections and people who can, are willing to give a helping hand, if only they can all meet one another. That would be a great thing.

EJ: Yeah.

LIZ: Maybe we should do that one day.

EJ: Yeah, I'm sure they have alumni things, from, like, the high school and reunions and stuff. That's a good start for networking, cause people who grew up here—maybe don't necessarily live here anymore, you know, they can share their stories, help each other out.

LIZ: Absolutely. I think that would be a great idea and so-- where now, what are you

doing now? What is your job? Now I have to say, as your mother, you were, I remember you thinking about law as a possible career. But you also always loved sports and you thought about being a sports journalist, and when you were in college, you kind of juggled them both. You majored in criminal justice, sort of like a prelaw track, but you also minored in sports journalism. And, so, talk about that.

EJ: So my goal was, going to college, I took a prelaw program and I wanted to go to law school after graduating. So, I did four years there, and I minored in journalism, because that was kind of a side hobby. I enjoyed writing, I enjoyed sports, and I wanted to have a minor so that I wouldn't have all my eggs in one basket. When I graduated, I put some thinking into it, and also part of it was the timing of LSAT. And I figured I would take a couple of months and try and land a job in the sports industry first, see what I could muster together, and if it didn't work out, after a few months, take the LSAT and gear up towards law school.

One and a half months after I graduated college, I found a job on Craigslist at Major League Baseball Advanced Media, doing social media. And I worked my way up quickly as a part-timer. After two years, I'm now full-time new media strategist—I manage social media for six major league baseball teams, amongst other digital initiatives. So now, that's what I'm doing now. Came a long way...

LIZ: And you actually get paid to go to spring training.

EJ: Yes, spring training, and I'm going to spend most of October traveling for the post-season, going to games and stuff. .

LIZ: And you got to hang around the Yankees, which is your favorite team.

EJ: Yeah, I was around the Yankees a little bit. Tough year for them, though. They'll be back.

LIZ: So, you also, your business trips consist of—

EJ: Yeah, I travel a lot, which-- I like traveling. It's peaceful, I feel like. But I travel a lot. I'm lucky enough to go to games a lot. A lot of things went right, I worked hard, yeah, that's what happened.

LIZ: And working hard is definitely a part—now that's an example of something that you hadn't exactly anticipated doing that kind of work.

EJ: No.

LIZ: You didn't say, "Oh, I'm going to do social media."

EJ: No, digital media was nowhere in my expertise, being like a general user of social media. I have a basic understanding of digital stuff, but it wasn't, like, what I was

studying or building skills in. It just sorta happened that way. That's a lot of opportunity comes from, just you get your foot in the door somewhere, and then you work as hard as you can, see what happens. And it doesn't necessarily mean that—you know, people will ask me, "Oh, how'd you get to where you are?" Well, there's no blueprint, because I didn't study to do this. I just took an opportunity and ran with it, and this is where I'm at now. I'm the only person that got hired part-time—I'm not the only one anymore but I was the first one that got hired part-time that got a full-time position doing what I'm doing with the class I got hired with. And it really comes down to just seizing an opportunity, and, again, that comes back from fundamentals and that foundation that I built here, the school system here-- the goal was always success, and, you know, believe in yourself and try your hardest. I still remember the teachers giving me pep talks about effort and everything—that stuff definitely helped me later.

LIZ: Well, I think Ridgewood also is testament to what can be achieved through will and effort, but also, there are a lot of American dream stories, a lot of success stories. And your grandparents, my parents, they came from Cuba, and my father was a photographer in Havana, but here he had to make ends meet. And even though he had dreams of being a movie star and perhaps having his photography studio, he worked in a factory and my mom stayed home-- she had wanted be a singing star in Cuba, but she felt strongly about being home to raise my brother and me. And they worked really hard, but they also told us that you're going to college-- you don't have a choice in that and the choice is, what are you going to study? That's the choice. And so, there was never a question in my mind that I was going to go to higher education. I always liked, leaned toward artistic things. And I always liked writing, also liked singing, wrote for the school paper. Went to school in Union City where you are living now because now it's trendy. But it was a gateway for immigrants—Germans, Irish, Italians, then Cubans in the '60s, and we ended up there after I was born in the Bronx. The Bronx was getting a little dicey, so my mom said, "I want to go to Miami." My father said, "I hear there are Cubans in Union City, New Jersey." So we moved there and that's where I grew up, and I would say, like 50% of the city was Cuban at the time. And it was very safe—it was mostly families from Cuba, and they were all very overprotective, and there was a real can-do attitude. People worked two and three jobs-- even doctors and lawyers from Cuba-- when they were just trying to get started here. And they lent one another, bankers who had known them from Havana lent them money to start businesses. And some of my teachers from Emerson High School live here in Ridgewood, and I've seen them since then. And the kids I went to school with went on to go to college-- not every single one of them, but most of them, and now they're success stories as well.

We didn't have the quality of education that Ridgewood has, just because Union City didn't have the resources. But the teachers were extremely committed-- they would hug you, you know, which people can't do now because you'd get in trouble. But at the time, there were some Cuban teachers, also, but it was just a very family oriented environment, and I remember that-- you know, my mom, you know, passed away when I was 14-- cerebral hemorrhage-- and my dad, the following year. And one of my

teachers, she was my algebra teacher, Mrs. Vasquez, she actually said to me, "I am willing to adopt you, and you come live with me." Well, she lives in Ridgewood now, and I keep in touch with her, and also through Facebook. But that's the kind of-- that's what it was. So I went to a school, too, that was very supportive, and that also was very much about reaching, aiming high-- aiming high even though, like I said, they didn't have all the financial resources, but when they had parents' night, every single parent was there, because they all wanted their kids to do well.

And now I look at the kids I went to school with whose parents were a lot like mine, you know, no matter what they had been in Cuba, they were starting, like, in blue-collar jobs and stuff, and then later they went on to get their medical license again or, you know, they took the bar and all that. My parents were pretty humble, so my father didn't get to go to college, but still did well as far as providing for us. But I look at a lot of my classmates and am pretty impressed, you know, and it was just because of the support and the love that they felt. And their parents would keep the pressure on them, you know, like the kind of pressure that—not so much pressure but, just you know, pushing you to do your best, because they know to reach your potential, and that here, not only can you get it from your family, if you're blessed enough, you know, but in this town you also-- it's a community-wide, it's a school-wide, support system. And in Union City it was-- the teachers did as much as they could with what they had. And the parents, of course-- it just speaks to how important it is, you know, to have people believe in you. And even though you don't realize it, like I didn't always, you know, when you're a teenager and you have other priorities. But someday you'll look back and you think they were right (laugh). They were right, so...

But anyway, but Ridgewood has a lot of folks like that who were products of that belief system and that support system, no matter where they came from. If they grew up in an immigrant enclave or a more privileged economically town, I think that positive environment-- it's like a laboratory for what can happen, you know, when you are encouraged to reach your potential. So... so I'm glad that that we were fortunate enough to have that. So, anything else?

EJ: Not really, I mean—I think we nailed most of it on the head. Just in general again, higher standard in school, a good sense of community, cohesiveness between families and people growing up, like the people I grew up, you know, we were very close. You guys, like all the parents, were—I wouldn't say all close, but communicated, you know. You knew each other, the phone lines rang quickly when we got ourselves into some trouble (laughs)...

LIZ: Yes, yes, we had our own little CIA.

EJ: Right, right, so, you know, it was community, and you were not afraid to call someone else's parents and chat a bit, "Oh, you know, how the kids doing, blah, blah, blah..." It was just, you know, just a good tightknit community, where, you know, education's put at a great value and I would not want to grow up anywhere else. I would love to raise my kids here and I now understand and appreciate the values and

the advantages of growing up in a town like Ridgewood. And I'll never forget that, and I'll never lose appreciation for that, and I hope I can provide my kids the same opportunity.

LIZ: I'm glad I made the right decision when I looked at 100 homes. (laughs with EJ)