



# NOS QUEDAMOS/ WE STAY

Jessica Clemente (Chief Executive Director)  
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## Season 1, Episode 10

NOS QUEDAMOS/ WE STAY (PRC Oral Storytelling Project)

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**Anna Vincenty** [00:00:00] My name is Anna Vincenty. I am a Nuyorican. I was raised in the Patterson projects and I now live on Throgs Neck, which is also part of the Bronx.

**Jessica Clemente** [00:00:11] Hello, my name is Jessica Clemente. I am a Nuyorican raised in Mill Brook Houses. It's in the Mott Heaven section of the South Bronx. I still live in the Bronx, but in the Allerton section. Growing up, I was always conscious of where I lived, how I grew up, how I felt, or how sick I was along the way. I suffered from asthma. There was a lot about where I lived and how I lived that raised my consciousness around the environment and learning more about the environment. However, as I began that journey about learning more about the environment, I found myself just learning more about environmental science and conservation and wildlife biology and learning about the rainforest and what's happening with the former station in the rainforest. So I kind of took me international in focus and not necessarily like in my backyard. When I graduated from college and I was looking for work, I came across a job description and the job description kind of noted it was it was in the Bronx, it was a community participatory research study, and it was in partnership with four organizations. Nos Quedamos was one of those four organizations working with Congressman Serrano on an air quality study and health effects, specifically asthma. And for me, that was the aha moment where I was like, wait a minute, you know, I'm looking outside of my home, my community, to save a world when in fact, here's my opportunity to contribute and really do so in a way with my neighbors that I want them to learn more. And so when I applied for the position, this is how...how small the world is, I guess when I applied for the position and I called, I spoke to Anna. And in the media and research would tell you at that time that it's" how we lived, not so much how the communities were being built around us or so much how, you know, waste transfer stations were being sited throughout our community. There was no mention of that. However, this research was really looking at, you know, focusing the attention around land use and land-use decisions, specifically how waste transfer stations were being like...sited in our community in numbers that outweighed the rest of the city as a whole. I walked out of there empowered and inspired, and I said, "you know what? This is...this is this could very well be my place."

**Anna Vincenty** [00:02:54] As a young girl. I was always doing so many different things and my father used to accuse me that I was like white rice, wanting to be involved in everything. I used to like to do mud pies and there was a police officer who used to come by and he used to make believe that he would sit down with me and have a cup of tea because I prepared a cup of tea for him every day, you know. So I was always very friendly and I always wanted to know what was happening around me. And as I grew up and my father wanted to move us out of that environment and he moved us into a home I became involved in...in all of the activities that the school had. So I was in the gym, I was in the ping pong, I was in the basketball, I was in the running team and so on and so forth. And then, of course, I grew up, I got married and then I became involved being PA president of an elementary and junior high school. Why? Because I saw what was happening in the

community that I was in. And I lived in a community where people of color were not treated with a lot of respect because it was mostly a Jewish community. And I said, there's something wrong with this picture. In fact, they used to accuse me and say, "Hey Anna, why don't you learn how to play mahjong?" I said, "I don't need to learn how to play mahjong. All I need to do is be able to talk to you to make sure that you understand what it is I'm saying." You know, I kept getting involved in different aspects and I was in banking, to be very honest with you. I was in banking and they used to say, "How the heck do you have all of this time if you're in banking to do what you're doing?" And I said, "because somebody has to make sure, because I am a true believer and I've always been a true...United to stand but divided to fall. I've always believed that." So I felt that if you could get people together and unite them in one cause, you would at least be able to get somewhere. I had such great admiration for Yolanda Garcia and what she was trying to do, and especially when we were trying or when she was trying very hard to close the...the waste transfer station. And we went to the point at the time and when we went there, a lot of people were outside playing dominoes and checkers and they weren't listening. And I said, "you need to come in, you need to hear what's happening in your community because it's so important, because this is what's affecting you". So what I asked them to do was to please take pictures of the garbage. So when they came in with the pictures of the garbage, I was able to get those people in. And when Yolanda started to speak, Yolanda was a short woman, so they had to give her a...a little stool for her to stand on so that people could really see her. And the minute that she started to speak, I saw the heads. All of the sudden I could see people paying attention to what she was saying. And I think that's what pulled me in. And I said, this is something that I have to be here for and I have to stay and I have to try to help because I realized how important it was. And I think that the one thing that gave me a lot of pride was when they were able to close that waste transfer station. And I knew that at least finally Yolanda got to see one of her dreams come true. You know, so, of course, here it is 30 years later, I'm still here saying to myself, I got to go because no one monkey wants the show, you know?

**Jessica Clemente** [00:06:23] But I can't let Anna go. I can't let Anna go, because it's a blessing to have her. Well, I can't tell you how grateful I am to be able to have her wisdom and her experience and her connection to the beginnings. Because, unfortunately, with this work...it's generational.

**Anna Vincenty** [00:06:48] Yes.

**Jessica Clemente** [00:06:48] And it's I say unfortunate because the problems can be solved. Right. I mean, we come up with community innovative solutions on a daily basis. Right. So we have solutions that can be applied. It's just unfortunate that the amount of time and will and resources kind of continue to keep us or hold us back where we have to fight and fight and fight. But then we lose folks along the way. We lose leaders along the way, we lose that energy or we get discouraged or we get sidetracked because life happens. Right. And so to be blessed with having Anna, supporting my leadership now. Right? And I stand on wide shoulders and Anna is one of them is...is an honor and a privilege and an opportunity that I want to continue to pass forward. I want to pass the baton forward for the next generation and have this inter-generational leadership that...that builds toward change, that builds towards sustainable change. And the transformation, finally, that we need to see. And I pray that now is the time. It needs to be the time. Well, the mission of Nos Quedamos has been, as I say, not just the mission, but our name. We Stay, Nos Quedamos, right? In 1994 when the Bronx was burning and revitalization was at our foot, at our door. None of those plans included the people who stayed, who put in the sweat equity to salvage their communities, save their homes, rebuild. None of that

included them. And so Yolanda Garcia, as well as other community leaders, got together and said, "no, we're going to stay, we're going to plan, we're going to build and we're going to revitalize ourselves. We don't need anyone to come in and kind of parachute in and save us". So it's always been in our DNA that we're committed to our collective self-determination, that our sustainable work has everything to do with not just the audacity, right, of stepping up and saying, we can plan for our own communities, we can build around what we know is important, but we're going to do so in a way that's sustainable by understanding that Yolanda Garcia's son died of asthma. And this isn't a disease that we shouldn't be dying from. Right? Compelled her to really look at the built environment and the decisions that were made in building out the affordable housing. So a lot of our buildings were sustainable 30-plus years ago before it became the thing to do. And I think that just pays homage to the expertise that we have in our communities, that we know exactly what we need and we know how to manage our lives. Just given the opportunity and the resources, we can do it right. And so we could create the conditions that maintain our health, create the conditions that maintain our culture and place keep we don't need to place make right? It's about place keeping and ensuring that our experiences and our culture show up in our community. And so the development of the affordable housing development arm of Nos Quedamos has always paid...paid homage to our ancestral roots. So we will have like names that reflect our culture in architecture. We'll have Taíno images that are on the face of the buildings. The stories that we talk about have everything to do about, like our roots. The main climate issues that we're facing in our community today have been accumulated, accumulated over years and years. So we're talking about poor air quality. We're talking about truck traffic, diesel truck traffic, that crosscuts our community leaving behind particulate matter that gets us sick to the point where we're dying. We're talking about living in a community riddled with Superfund sites that leach chemicals into our soil, into our water, that...that kind of further, you know, hastens, you know, our demise. We're talking about, you know, heat and the heat burden being in a metropolitan city, being a city that's built what they call the concrete jungle. Right. Having these impermeable surfaces, you know, add and contribute to the heat burden. But then it also adds and contributes to the...the aging infrastructure that we have in New York. And so our stormwater management systems are not where they need to be. And so you get a storm like Ida, which we've had recently, which wasn't a hurricane by the time it hit New York, devastating communities with floods. Like our office was completely flooded out, you know? And the damages are something that we certainly weren't forecasting or prepared for but now have to deal with. Right. So we're looking at climate change, we're not looking at it in a one dimension, like we're fighting climate change on all kinds of levels at every intersection you could possibly think of. We need to stop and think about our preparedness, right? The first 72 hours of any crisis community is on their own. Fact. The city doesn't jump in. And until way after and by then, you're already like in a precarious position. The support of resiliency hubs, the support of putting in place redundant infrastructure, solar, energy, right, broadband communications, stormwater management systems--just the mere fact of just being organized around what to do in an emergency is enough to...to help communities really kind of combat the initial crisis and COVID was a wake up call for all of us. You know...it's not just a climate crisis of something that is abstract. It's the public health crisis that we also face. Right. And living through this pandemic kind of reaffirms how important, you know, it is for communities to be self-determined, to be prepared, and to really look at asset base. Right. Like, what do we have that we know works? Right. How are we working from what we have? Very specific successes of this last year that I could I can highlight is the capital investment that we've been able to leverage, \$1.3 million in state money to be able to create three resiliency hubs in our local community garden footprint, broadband connectivity in our buildings. This was before the crisis on the war came down the pipeline in 2018, 2019,

then we hit COVID. And that goes to show you how ahead of the curve our communities really are.

**Anna Vincenty** [00:14:16] I think it's important that we, people of color, we need to sit together. We need to try to understand everything that is being said and done. And I don't want the scientists or the people that know give us \$50 words. I want them to talk to us like we really don't understand. We really don't know. Show it to us in pictures if need be, so that we have a better understanding so that we can have a grip on it. Because we the people, are the only ones who can actually make the changes as long as we know what's happening. As long as people are honest with us and tell us, you know, don't sugarcoat something. Tell us exactly what it is. We will definitely do it. It's like I said at one meeting that I went to. You push and you push and you push, and we're finally at the edge and we fall into the water. But the only problem here is, is that you don't realize how resilient we are. So like like apples, we keep bouncing back. We come back, and we're going to keep coming back and we're going to get stronger and we're going to get better. Just as long as you give us the right answers and you be honest with us and tell us exactly what is going on and what it is we need to know. Explain it to us like you were talking almost to a child so that they understand and they can get a grip of it and do what needs to be done.

**Jessica Clemente** [00:15:41] I think the specific role that we play in addressing...We and people of color, play in addressing climate change is the fact that we bear the brunt, we bear the burden. I mean, we are the ones that are at the front line and forefront of the disadvantages of what happens when the climate change is not addressed or when decisions are made to cite certain things in our communities, like we have to live through that. We live through that crisis. We know firsthand exactly what that experience is. And so we too, right know firsthand what we need to do to resolve it. I think part of Anna's message has everything to do with let's not overly talk about what it is. I think just making the message easy for the community to connect and not get too scientific. Right. It's not about, you know...so much the ozone layer, but what happens when a waste transfer station is sited in your community and you can't breathe or when it's really hot outside and you can't see because of the visibility? Right. And so all those things make direct connections to how you feel, why your kids have to be out of school because they're suffering from asthma. And then what does that absenteeism do to their long-term performance and success as a child into adulthood? Right. If they have too many days out of school because they're out with asthma, then they're missing all that learning loss. The learning loss is deep. You know what then? You know, you connect this to families and this way then they understand. But if you just talk about things in the abstract, folks can't connect. Because the fact is, like, we're burdened with other issues too. Like we have rent burdens, food security burdens, you know there's all these other crises that our communities are going through that to be able to activate people in a way that they're compelled to make change is about making those clear connections.

**Anna Vincenty** [00:17:51] I think it's important that the people today, especially the young, that they get involved, that they listen, that they talk, that they see. It doesn't have to be organizational. Talk to your neighbor. Talk to your friends. Talk to your relatives. Get involved. What's bothering them? What is it that they're thinking? What are their needs? What are their wants? Because, again, with everything else that's going on around them, with the price of food, with the price of rent, with the price of gas, with the crime that's going on. You still need to know what's going on so that you can stay involved because you need to make sure that you take hold of what's happening because again, united you stand and divided you fall. And if you get together, you can make a change. You can make a change. It does not matter. You don't need the money. Listen, when Nos Quedamos first

started, without exaggeration, everybody used to make some people bought water, some people bought soda, some people bought chips, some people made rice and beans, but everybody brought something to the table so that they could sit, so that they can talk, so that they can break bread together, so that they can drink water if that's all that they had. But they were able to make their points made and heard and listened to, and they made...and that's so important coming together and listening and wanting to become part of a change, of a change and a good change.

**Jessica Clemente** [00:19:17] The advice I have for young people of color as they are setting out into this space and to enter into the world of...of...of...of question and answer, like Anna described, I would say...pace yourself. This doesn't happen overnight. There's not a quick fix and you're going to sacrifice. And you're going to hurt and you're going gonna fight. But the fight can beat you up if you don't pay attention to the toll it can put on you. So while we are. While we are real about the challenges, while we are real about the need to step up and speak out. Be real about what it's going to take from you personally. And they talk about burnout in a way like, yeah, you got to avoid burnout, but you don't know you're burnt out, until you are burnt out, so you gotta be kind to yourself. I'm still trying to figure that out. Like I don't even have the advice on that quite yet, but it's about knowing that there's not an overnight solution and you got to be prepared to be in this for the long haul, and you have to be strategic because we can't burn out every fire, but we can't be that leader in all places at all times. But we can be support. We could be the...the bullhorn. We could do other things, in other ways, be present, ask questions, know that your voice is valid, your lived experience is valid, and you're an expert. So share that. And be empowered by that.