

LAWTON M. CHILES CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: Norma Labato

INTERVIEWER: Tyler Hillier

LOCATION: Tampa, Florida

DATE: November 14, 2015

Dr. Denham: Thank you for giving me this great opportunity to interview my grandmother about her life and times in Tampa, Florida. She's lived a long life and seen so much, and she was more than willing to share her stories and thoughts as she saw American and Floridian history unfold before her eyes. I asked her questions about what life was like when she was younger. I wanted to know what Tampa was like, how the people acted, and what they thought of all the crazy events happening around them. I got see this perspective from a young Spanish girl, doing her best to make it in 20th century Florida, and it's certainly different than our lives today. I think you'll enjoy some of the stories my grandmother tells regarding the Civil Rights Movement, Ybor's Cigar Industry, and even a very special presidential visit with a special story attached. The interview gave me a good insight into what life was like back then, and how people acted to the events that seem like they happened so long ago. It's too often we forget that these are more than just chapters in our history books, but chapters of people's lives, and all that history is still walking with us today. I hope you'll enjoy the interview, that unique stories and perspectives, and, most of all, my grandmother's sense of humor. Tyler Hillier

Tyler: Today is November 14th, 2015. We are here in Tampa, Florida and we're sitting down with my grandmother in her home. Would you mind stating your name?

Norma: Well do you want my name as it is stated in the United States? Or as it is stated historically, by my family, which version would you like?

Tyler: Both.

Norma: Both alright, if it is Tampa's which is in the United States, you would want my name you would hear Norma Barbon Lobato, if you wanted the way it would be stated in a European country, primarily Spain, you would hear something like Norma Para Felipe Barbon Lobato. That's my full name. Because we would state my mother's maiden name, my other grandmother's maiden name, my grandparents name and my married name. So now you would know if you were going to do a historical or biographical background about me you would know everything about me because you know the names of my grandparents.

Tyler: Okay, so when where you born?

Norma: I was born... where?

Tyler: When.

Norma: I was born November the 8th, 1934. That was 81 years ago this past Sunday.

Tyler: And where were you born?

Norma: I was born right here in Tampa Florida in Ybor City, 17th street and 24th avenue.

Tyler: Wow, that's very specific.

Norma: Yes it is.

Tyler: So where are we right now?

Norma: We are at 3124 West Tampa Bay Blvd, in Tampa, Florida. It's an area called West Tampa. Like you would say east, west, Chicago, east Manhattan, west Manhattan, you know it's an area.

Tyler: You've been here awhile?

Norma: Well in this particular site, Tyler, I have been since February of 1957. In this particular site. Before that, I was at my birth site. So I've only lived in two places in my life.

Tyler: Let's go back in time here. Where was the first place you lived? What were those first couple of years, you can remember. What was it like? What can you tell me?

Norma: Well my parents, keep in mind, their young adult life wasn't, right here in Tampa, and they were experiencing a tremendous period of hardship. So hard, that when my mother growing up didn't have anything to eat, at one point had to eat ashes, to fill her tummy.

Tyler: Was this the Great Depression?

Norma: This was the Great Depression. She married in 1928, and it would sound horrific for now, but at that time, it was very commonplace. There were no contraceptives. So friends of her, family, would perform, when they were married and became pregnant, would have abortions. And those were self-induced by whatever methods existed at the time. And the reason they did that, was because they couldn't bring a child into the world without being able to feed them so they weren't about to watch their child die of starvation. Um, when my parents were married in 1928, they were given a lot by a sister at my address I gave before. And she received that lot as a gift because her sister was leaving for New York so she could find work and be able to eat. So she was lucky enough to get that little piece of land. Then they found a house that had been burned down and found that some of the wood was good so my father and his uncle began to build a house.

Tyler: Can you give the names?

Norma: My father was Felix Felipe Barbon, my mother was Ovania Para Barbon. And they found some wood and they were able to pick up the wood before anyone else, they were the first ones there, and they picked up all that wood and carried it to this lot and my father and his uncle built this little house with this wood that they were able to salvage and that was my home. And you could see the sky, and I remember this. I could look from my bed and look up and see the sky, which appeared between the boards. In winter, for many winters, I remember being so extremely cold it was almost unbearable and my mother had these real heavy quilts that she would put on me and I remember waking up in the morning with tremendous sore throats because when you slept you are inhaling or breathing that cold air and you would awaken from sleeping for about an hour or so with a sore throat as result of having breathed in that cold air. I remember also my mother had chickens she was wise enough to grow and how she managed to get some baby chicks and finally but she ended up with 8, 10 chickens. I remember she told me that the baby food that I had was eggs that were just kind of poached eggs and that would be what she would feed me. There was no baby food and she would get potatoes and she would boil the potatoes and then she would mash them, very watery and she would feed me that. That was the baby food. She would buy for \$.10 a sack of potatoes which would feed her for a week and a bag of rice so they would eat rice and potatoes. I had a brother, she had a child before me and his name was Felix Barbon the 3rd. Now she couldn't go to hospital because she couldn't afford it. They had no means so they had what they called, midwives so she had a very hard pregnancy. And by the way her name was Ovania, O-V-A-N-I-A.

She had my brother and the midwife was helping her assisting her with the birth used forceps which damaged his head being so tender she not being medical the child died three days later. His hair was reddish, very reddish and a very big, big baby so he had our Auburnish, reddish hair, and of course my mother was devastated. Then two years later I was born and so I was preceded in that birth luckily for whatever reason I was the one to survive. Now if she had any abortions behind me after my birth I would assume she did because I remember her telling me that she wanted no more children and one was all that they could afford to feed and at least keep well.

When my father became a barber, things started to improve a little bit and things became a little bit easier for her. She was a cigar maker and some of the stories that she told me were really incredible and she told me that she would see me in Hell first before she ever saw me making cigars because it was so horrific. The conditions under which she worked. Her fingertips were scarred because in making cigars especially in winter they used a blade to cut the cigar leaves and so on and in the process and when it was cold her fingers became numb. There was no heat because in summer you couldn't put fans and in winter you couldn't put heat because it would affect the tobacco, and that was the prime concern, not the worker and her fingertips were scarred because she would cut herself many times in using the blade for the making of the cigars. But anyway she made cigars until 1961 when she retired. She started working in the cigar factories at age 11.

Tyler: Oh wow.

Norma: And she worked in the factory sweeping and they would pay her \$.15 a week.

Tyler: This was in Ybor?

Norma: In Ybor city. One of the cigar factories was in Palmetto Beach and she would walk, an 11-year-old by herself early in the morning and she would carry rocks with her because on the way it was very swampy and there were gators resting on the dry pieces of land that she would throw rocks at so she could cross and go to the cigar factory. Now, I can't imagine my grandsons throwing rocks at gators to get where they were going.

Tyler: You won't even let us cross the street by ourselves.

Norma: But that that was her life. Then as I grew I remember I used to walk about to have blocks and I did this by myself to the elementary school and she, at the beginning of school each September, she would buy me a pair shoes and she would buy me some, what we call today, Jeans. But back then there were very functional--that we would call dungarees. We had a couple of flannel shirts, maybe a coat, I can't remember. I must of had something when it got colder. But anyway we walked to school and then in Christmas my feet would grow, of course my shoes were hurting but I had to keep them on until Christmas because at Christmas, without any declarations by the way, she would buy me another pair of shoes and those would last til' the end of the school year, possibly to most of the summer until I was able to get another pair.

I was poor but I didn't realize it because the entire neighborhood was pretty much in the same situation that I was in. I grew up with Italians, with Cubans, and a few Spaniards like myself, although I don't consider myself a Spaniard but I am certainly a descendent of Spaniards. I have one grandfather that was born in northern Spain. I have my grandmother on my father's side that was born in Key West and then on my mother's side, both of my grandparents were born in Ybor City on 8th Avenue and 22nd St. Believe it or not, I don't remember the address but it was on was on the corner of Eighth Avenue and 22nd street. Anyway but they also struggled and my mother and dad as I said-- they became a little bit better off and they survived by having fruit trees and having her garden, chickens-- that was survival. As for me we didn't know we

were poor and as I said we grew up with Italian immigrants and I learned three languages very early on, I was fluent in all three.

My grandfather on my father's side my paternal grandfather has tremendous stories to tell and my father at the time of World War II, I believe, told me he was he was born, by the way both my parents were born the same year, 1902, and when World War II came around in 1941, he was already married and he had one child so he was classified as I believe what they called a 3A. If you were a 1A you were ready to be drafted, war drafted, but he was a 3A which meant he was married and had children. So what he was committed to was working for the government as a barber because that's what he did. So he went to what is now called Drew Park, which was then known as Drew field and they housed soldiers it was uh, I guess, a leaping point to the European theater. And we had German prisoners there for a while and there some of them escaped one time and that was kind of interesting and they finally found all three and two of them they found hidden underneath a house.

Tyler: That's just crazy to imagine.

Norma: But anyway that was not too far from here, as a matter of fact.

Tyler: So what were the thoughts around the time, the opinions of the War before Pearl Harbor and afterward?

Norma: Well prior to Pearl Harbor as near as I can remember and by the way I remember clearly listening to the fireside chats of...

Tyler: FDR

Norma: FDR. And FDR was looked at as almost godlike. He lifted the country out of incredible, incredible depression hunger; there were so many suicides. It was a horrific time but he lifted the country out of that and he started what was known as the WPA which workers established the state parks, national parks and he had people working and when that happened they began to lift themselves up, so starvation was not so eminent. The spirit of the time was definitely not war. The people were definitely not in the mindset of going to war when they had just been at a couple years ago been at the precipice of dying. So no they were not, they didn't want war and Roosevelt knew that and to the best of my recollection, I think Roosevelt told Churchill exactly that; that the people were not ready to go to war and that they would not go to war. And then of course once the attack on Pearl Harbor, the American people came together and then you couldn't keep them out, the lines to volunteer were long.

Tyler: That was a big event.

Norma: Just about as big as it can get and the only thing I could compare it with the would-be 9/11.

Tyler: I was just going to say.

Norma: That would be just about as far as the emotions some ran, some were frightened some were courageous some were "let's go get them", there were so many attitudes but all of them

pointing to one thing and that was we stand together. But growing up its fascinating, but growing up as a matter fact let me regress a moment. Today one of the first things that you become aware of, or you're cognizant of, or you may even be asked is "what is your political affiliation." It's amazing but back then, we didn't know! I mean you treated people and you were kind of a mindset, not a political party but what was your mindset? Did you want this man who said "such and such" or did you want the other man who said "such and such". Being Republican or being Democrat or being whatever you wanted to be was not the biggest issue. Now let me point something else out too--when my mother was young and before I was born she began as I said at an early age, but after she married she was still working in the cigar factories. And while she was working in the cigar factories they started learning through lectures but that's another chapter for another day because each one of these topics we could spend an hour on. And I hope, I would like really for you to get some insight on to what this life was like. Any semblance between then and now is purely coincidental and time being the only connection. Today they would be looked on very badly, even in the 50's under Joe McCarthy they were looked upon very badly. But my mother back in 1931, she became communist. She never enrolled but the workers, the people, heard of a party that was for the workers. They heard there was an association that was to help promote the workers. And she says "I want, I want to hear that, I want to belong to that", because it was a form almost of a union without being called a union in the sense that we hear about unions today. It was almost like a movement, a feeling, a mental attitude that they were sticking together and by sticking together they would get better. Keeping in mind, that the memories of their dire situations were very fresh, so she was, and my father, were those that marched down the street singing the song that depicted the socialist not socialist, but communist movement, and that kind of eased off a little bit and it really got very bad in the 50's. Then all of a sudden, and she told me this herself, why it became such a dirty word she couldn't understand. But maybe because she didn't read enough or she didn't hear enough because they couldn't afford a newspaper and everything they picked it up from the radio. But she couldn't understand why there was sudden and, she says almost overnight, there was a hatred for Communism. They said "This is going to overthrow the United States!" That's impossible, that was ridiculous because they saw it as a unified movement, unifying the workers. Of course maybe the manufacturers didn't see it that way but she couldn't understand the connotation of the word communist until Joe McCarthy came along. Then under Eugene McCarthy, not Eugene, Joe McCarthy, under Joe McCarthy then it suddenly became almost a word as bad as "Nazi", or if you were communist you were a "Nazi", you were a "Fascist". These were very ugly, ugly words and we had just come out of world war and Nazism, was, that was taboo that was horrid. Then of course the witch hunts, and she lived through that and so did I, where we couldn't say and I remember my mother telling me, "Don't you use the word communist", I don't know why I would have used it but I was warned not to. For what I didn't understand why...

Tyler: It was a real fear then.

Norma: Oh yes it was and the worst part about it was not the fear of communism--it was a fear of our own Americans turning against us and I think that was the beginning of my becoming aware that there were other Americans that didn't like us. There were other Americans that we were supposed to be fearful of, which was a new feeling and a very difficult thing to understand to be

afraid of your fellow American. It became very real when there was racism and prejudice in this country. Then it became very real. As a child I remember that they would say no Latins or dogs allowed and those in my era couldn't go certain places because Latins were not permitted and I remember my father going to Sulfur Springs and he took us swimming to Sulfur Springs, which is now polluted you can't even put your feet in the water, but it was a beautiful area it was a spring, clear, pure, and I remember my father saying to my mother "We're going swimming", and my mother being very afraid and he walked in, paid at the entrance and we walked right on through and no one told him anything. But my father had a temperament about him, a look about him I think that demanded respect and we were never bothered. But yes I grew up with that prejudice too. So it was a very emotional period of my life; tranquil but yet emotional in the sense a what we had to fear and that was the first time that I was about 14 maybe 15, that I became aware of being afraid of my fellow Americans was through prejudice and was through politics. That was a big turning point in my life. But like a said then later on, after I married it never ceased. There was a period there during the Vietnam War, or the Korean War let me add, the Korean War and it's amazing how I lived through World War II, I lived through the Korean War, very vivid. I remember the Vietnam War, I've lived through so many wars it's incredible and always the divisiveness among the American people. To me I was very aware of on my middle teens.

Tyler: So it would've been around the 50s, early 50s?

Norma: Yes, yes it was in the early 50's.

Tyler: So many people today, we tend to have a bit of an idealistic view of the 50's like this Golden Era, prosperity, American unity.

Norma: I don't want to negate the fact that there was no unity. There was some but you know there was a resentment. It began with the Korean War. The soldiers brought that back and they kept saying that it was futile what they were doing. They were sent to die but to what end? For what results? The heroism of World War II was nonexistent during the Korean War. In fact they began, when they came back to, as much as possible when I say possible because they certainly didn't want to create resentment among other Americans but they were the ones that came back and said, "You know, we're doing this and they don't even call it a war, they call it a police action and, and what are we policing?" And that, that feeling, that mindset I think was born during that period. Where you resented the fact, and when the soldiers came back and many of them began to say what they felt; we began to distrust the government. Not a whole lot but the little seed...

Tyler: Had been planted.

Norma: Had been planted at that time. That mistrust--that we don't trust the government, we don't trust rich people. That division began and there was, there was a split and it began to grow wider until today which, as you see, is almost limitless.

Tyler: We're going to touch on that more later, definitely. Really quick I want to go back to something that you briefly brought up which would be civil rights in this era. The 40's 50s and 60s and what was that like here in Tampa and for you personally, what did you think?

Norma: Well Tampa keep in mind we were very small and but in Tampa --there was a lot of abuse; my mother witnessed hangings of black people. I witnessed, as a young person a very horrific incident in the 60s that could; I could've easily been injured in. But we sided with the black people. Keep in mind that where we grew up, there were so many different cultures in one and we got along! We were able to accept each other whether you were Italian, and in my neighborhood we had, like I mentioned we had Italians, we had Spaniards, Cubans, we had blacks! We had two black families in my neighborhood and we didn't single them out; they were just who they were and we accepted them. It was, it was funny we knew there were Italian, we knew there were black, but they were just people.

Tyler: It wasn't an issue.

Norma: It was a color that existed and they were just there. It was not something that we singled out or were aware of their differences. We were not aware of those differences. And yes the civil rights movement, I remember that was in 1960s. Well the hatred and there's so many facets, but the hatred in the 50s--it was very prominent. We used to go with my mother downtown and I used to see water fountains for white and water fountains for black and I couldn't understand why, now keep in mind here you are 11 or 12 years old, but a black person couldn't drink of your fountain. Why? Did they have germs? Were they sick? What was the reason, you know, for not letting them drink out of the water fountain. Now you're not brought up hating, you just witnessed it and you couldn't understand it because it was not within you. You didn't have that hatred. So yes, we were supposed to hate blacks, I mean wow, and when we went to school, my high school was mostly Latin. We had a couple of blacks but they were Cuban blacks; they were mixed. So we didn't notice them, we didn't differentiate, you know they were just there, a part of our lives and we went on from that. But when we began to notice it was very sad, it was frightening and if you asked me "what did you feel?" I felt fear. I remember seeing the Ku Klux Klan in the theater and I remember thinking "What was that?" It was scary and a burning cross and... I remember my mother speaking about it with fear and I'd learned to be afraid, I'd learned to be afraid of the Anglo. I learned to be afraid and being careful of what I said around Anglos because they hated me. Why they hated me, I don't know, but you began to feel that they were better than you. Why, you just couldn't put your finger on it but they had to be better. If not, why would they hate us? We were the interlopers here, it was the feeling. And you kind of got the feeling that this wasn't your country... this was their country, not yours. You were just here because they allow you to be here. It was a weird feeling, it was a feeling that you almost felt like you wanted to leave but where would you leave to? And then they used to say that it's not fair because my parents were born here the mother and father were both born here. I was a third-generation Tampan. Your mother is a fourth, you're fifth! We are in the minority as far as Tampa is concerned to be a fifth generation Tampan. I don't think you're going to find, you'd be hard-pressed to find somebody you know that is a fifth-generation Tampanian like you. It's almost unheard of. But yeah fear became front and center and an inferiority complex began to develop.

Tyler: So, when did you start to see the change? You know, obviously eventually the schools were reintegrated and the civil rights acts were passed, so did things change...?

Norma: The laws changed. Not the people. The people didn't change, the laws did, you would hear through the media "Oh we're all one, we're brothers and sisters, the church developed, oh we're all one under God!" No. When you got home and you locked the door, it was a different story. That hatred was there. The law said around 1954 [Brown Decision]. I'm going to guess, we started integrating the schools [not until much later]. Of course, Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act [1964] and as a result our schools began to be integrated. As a teacher in those public schools, the violence between the Anglos, the blacks, and at that time, the influx of Cubans....

Tyler: You were a teacher at that time?

Norma: Oh, I started teaching in 1956.

Tyler: So you experienced that firsthand?

Norma: Oh yes, I broke up more fights... I could've gotten hurt but thank goodness that I was respected by the students, I was liked by the students so when I would scream out and get between them, you know, they had enough that they respected what I did and I was able to stop it. And I did as much as I could to try to get them to work together and I formed clubs and I integrated clubs and I tried to teach them to appreciate each other. I used to tell them we're a salad not a soup bowl. Each of us in the salad has our own identity but we are blended together and I tried to do that, tried to show them that you know to get along. But I like to think that I was successful with many of the students that I taught.

Tyler: Where did you teach?

Norma: I started in 1956 and I retired and 91' within those years, I taught every grade except Grade 2 and Grade 4. From 1 through 12, I taught every level, except 2 and 4. I started my first year teaching I started in the first grade. I graduated with the English and elementary education, I graduated with the dual majors and I remember I wanted to teach high school and when I went for my interview with the administrator the administrator says are you insane? And I had a cold that day and I remember I had the sniffles and the administrator says "Are you insane? You think that you can teach English in high school have you looked at yourself?" I was insulted, I was 21 years old. Now when I look at you and I think 21. I was a baby but I wanted to teach seniors that was my love, senior English. And she says no way I can handle that identity. She says you would not last the day. She says you look no more than 16 years old and I had braids, can you imagine, I had this long hair which would be fashionable today but not back then and so I got a call at home and they said I got a job. Terrific, and I reported to the schooling when I got there I was given first grade. And that was how I began first grade. Then I taught third grade and I taught fifth grade, 6th grade then I went to high school and I finally got my wish in high school. I taught 10th, 11th, and 12th, in the last three years I taught 12th. Then they closed down the school...

Tyler: What school?

Norma: I was at Jefferson high school, the old Jefferson on Highland and Euclid and they closed that down, and that's another chapter, about what happened and why. And that school they told us that it was not fit for students and it's still existing today and still handling students. But anyway they dispersed the teachers and the students and I ended up at Pearce Junior High School. I taught 7th, 8th, and 9th, journalism. I taught drama and I taught journalism in the high school. Then I applied for bilingual education which was being established by the office of civil rights in the government. The United States Supreme Court mandated that bilingual education was to teach immigrants in their own language until they were able to accept the English language and become functional. So it was kind of a halfway house then so, I established that. I was hired to establish bilingual education in Hillsborough County which I did. Then Ronald Reagan came in the first thing he did was he did away with the office of civil rights and he did away with bilingual education. In which case I ended up at Madison junior high school department head and I was there till I retired. So yes I have seen quite a bit. But each topic, each thing that I give you is a whole chapter in it of itself.

Tyler: I know it's hard to squeeze it all.

Norma: It would take more than two hours if you wanted me to, to give you, you know, go into a description, I could do that and I would love to do it. I've never put it down, I've been asked to write my biography many, many times but I would love to do that with you and continue. What other topics did you have in mind besides the political, which was interesting in it of itself.

Tyler: Well we're going to take a brief intermission because I understand you have to leave, but we'll be back at it when you're back.

Norma: That sounds great, darling, I can barely stand the wait.

Intermission

Tyler: Welcome back after a brief intermission...

Norma: Brief is relative, my dear.

Tyler: Yes, very brief. Where we left off we were talking about your life in Tampa from your early childhood, the 30's, 40's, 50s and early 60s and what your life was like here in Tampa, how you viewed all of the events going on around you.

Norma: Okay, well that's a pretty big picture was there was anything specific you wanted me to refer to?

Tyler: Well yeah, we're going to keep moving along here with the 60's, I believe, one event I wanted to get your view on, your perspective from, was in the early 60's, John F. Kennedy came to town as I remember and I'm sure you do as well.

Norma: Oh that's my dream man right there.

Tyler: So what was that like for the little sleepy town of Tampa to have a presidential visit?

Norma: Well Tampa wasn't really that sleepy it was just small, but it was probably... the greatest event. I'm trying to think of one that might come close and I can't remember... I can't remember any event except maybe the end of World War II, that generated more enthusiasm and more joy, and delight than the visit of John F. Kennedy. He came down it was November, I believe it was like November 18 right around in there... I was teaching sixth grade at the time at Claire Mel Elementary School and I told my principal that I had been given, by a friend by the name of Gaston Fernandez, gave me a pass to go see the president at Fort Homer Hesterly and another handed me the invitation to attend a reception for John F. Kennedy at the, I think the name of the hotel was the Renaissance Hotel, it was on what is now Kennedy and Westshore, and I was delighted. I told my principal, you know, I was going to go see the president. He's going to be speaking and I think it was around 12 o'clock noon. I said I'm going and he said okay we'll cover your classes and he understood my dedication for the president. And I showed up at Fort Homer Hesterly to my seat and he spoke to the business community and some other things were received with some skepticism because Kennedy felt that some of the big corporations like United States Steel should not overcharge the public, that it should be a reasonable price so that all products made with steel would be affordable through retail for the public. So it was kind of a mixed bag as I recall. Some businessmen were not all that receptive and looking back I could understand why but anyway, after he spoke, I looked up at him and I think to myself I bet you that he is going to go change his shirt, because I had heard that he changed his shirt frequently so that he always looked clean and fresh. I understand most politicians do that now anyway, but anyway back then it was something new. So I figured, I said you know everybody was rushing out the front going out to I believe it was Howard Avenue and I said that he's going to come out through the side doors they had these huge, wide doors and so I ran in my heels to the side of the building. No one was there, everybody was upfront and sure enough, and I stood there and I saw some National Guard standing around and I said, "My guess was right." If not, they wouldn't have been standing there. So sure enough the gate, the doors, opened up and here comes this convertible with four security men on the running board and as he came out I called to him, "Mr. President!" And the National Guard kind of, you know, felt that I was intruding and I kind of stepped back and he says, "No, you can come over!" Can you imagine just like a regular guy? I was thrilled to death. And I walked over to him, I shook his hand for the second time; I shook his hand when he came as a senator but that was just a brief hand in the crowd but this was special. And he says something essentially about voting for him and I said, "Like my life depended on it." I forget exactly my words because I was beside myself. But anyway he pulled off and he went off in the convertible on a tour of Tampa, there many films that you can see now where he drove down Franklin Street. And I ran to my car to get into my car and drove to the Renaissance Hotel. I went upstairs and the room was jam packed with people waiting for the president and there was a photographer that I knew from Tampa and I told him, "Listen, when the president comes in, just for me, I want you to take his picture and I'll buy it from you." And he said okay, so he kind of took my order, wrote it down and he knew who I was and he said, "You want to be in it?" And I said "Oh no, I would spoil the picture!"

Tyler: (Laughs)

Norma: I now wish with all my heart that I had said yes, that I would've had a picture with the president, but foolish me. Anyway, it took a while and the president is coming, the shouts and the running and now the excitement and the doors open and here he comes and I'm standing right close to where he's coming in and he's shaking hands and he looks around and he looks at me and he points his finger at me and he says, "Didn't I just see you?" And I said, "Yes sir you did." And he says, "You really get around don't you?" And I said, "The best way I can."

Tyler: (Laughs)

Norma: And he went on and of course, shaking hands and everybody was in a festive mood and drinking and having hors d'oeuvres, if you could get it but the excitement was just incredible. It was incredible. The people in Tampa were beside themselves. I now went prior Fort Homer Hesterly, he went to what was called back then, if you know where the stadium is today that was called Al Lopez Field. It was a baseball field and it was packed jam with hundreds and hundreds of people and he went there to speak and he talked and shook hands and one of the things that several of us thought, it wasn't just my thought alone, but several of us mentioned, why don't they protect the president any more than they do? I could shoot him you know, anybody could shoot him, he's unprotected at the Al Lopez Field. I mean he was standing in the middle of the field, what a beautiful target, all by himself in the middle of the field in a stadium full of people that had not been checked, as there was not security back then. They just poured in! They were at the Renaissance Hotel, jam packed shoulder to shoulder as he walks in. And there were a few people including myself that kept saying, "I thought the president was supposed to be so secure? Where's all that security?" This was four days before he was assassinated as he was assassinated November 22 in Dallas at 1 o'clock so that was four days prior to his assassination, so I imagine the shock. I was teaching and I'll never forget, I was teaching anatomy to my sixth graders: how your body functions and how your body works. And I was lecturing to the students in my sixth grade class and the secretary comes to the door which was highly unusual and I looked and my first thought was something had happened to my daughter. My oldest daughter Desiree was... oh I'd say she was about a year and a month old, about 13 months, somewhere in there. And I thought something had happened to her. So I went to the door, fearful when she says, "Norma I have some bad news." Of course my heart dropped, I was thinking of my daughter and then she said the president had been shot. I felt relief and at the same time, in the next second, I was filled with... well if he's been shot he's certainly going to be all right. I could just see him sitting in the hospital bed with an arm bandage or something. I couldn't envision Kennedy being dead, that was not an option. It was some kind of maybe serious condition but not, not death. And I remember turning on the TV. I told my class and of course my class I had told the stories about the president so the kids were really, really upset when I told him he had been shot. And I turned on the TV in the classroom and Walter Cronkite was on and he says, "I understand they've called for the priest." Now knowing that Kennedy was Catholic, I had a really bad feeling because I knew that that's the last rights. So I heard that and just a chill came over me and in the next few minutes he said, I saw him choking back the words and I just knew... and he said the president had been shot and killed. I was beside myself and I remember going home crying that afternoon and I remember looking at a street light... there was a car that had pulled up beside me and I remember clearly, the man driving the car was just bawling. And it kind of took me aback that,

you know, I would see a man bawling like that. I got home, my mother was holding my daughter and she was crying. My father came to me and said something like oh what a terrible thing what's going to happen now, so on and so on and I took my daughter home. And I can tell you that I remember we spent the weekend watching television and I remember when they were saying that they had caught Oswald and I clearly... we had friends that had come over sharing our brief and we were looking at the TV and someone said, "Oh they're going to bring him out." And I said, "That's so stupid, that's crazy, how could they bring him out?" And I hadn't finished saying what I was saying when Ruby pulls out a gun and shoots Oswald in the stomach. So it was... it was hard then of course. The planning of the funeral, the first lady watching Air Force One, and seeing her just covered in blood was probably, next to his death, the most impacting moment. Because the first lady, she was like the Queen of Camelot and here she was in this pink outfit just covered in blood, the front of her legs covered in blood. We couldn't get enough of what happened. I was tired of crying, I was just wiped out so I said I'm going to step outside and get some fresh air so I step out the front door and I looked to my right and there is my neighbor sitting in the front porch just bawling her eyes out. And it was awful! So I went to see my other neighbor to my left, Bee we called her, and she was bawling on the front porch and we couldn't talk so I said forget this and went back inside. It was just horrific. But anyways, it was it was emotion unparalleled. It was worse than a family member dying.

Tyler: Wow, that sounds horrific.

Norma: It really was because with it went hope, there went your dreams. You remember, just keep in mind that at this time, Kennedy had just saved the world. And we saw him bigger than life. He had just, I mean literally, saved the world from an atomic war, which would've been the annihilation, Armageddon of mankind.

Tyler: Yeah.

Norma: So we were at the peak of adulation and they took him from us and that had he been maybe not as young, as vibrant, as intelligent, as successful, as giving the people so much hope, maybe then it wouldn't have been as bad. I'm sure it wouldn't have been. But he, it was something beyond to have lived it... it is an experience that I feel very privileged to have had because I lived it. He was just... he was bigger than life. What a tremendous, tremendous man he was. But anyways, that was the Kennedy assassination.

Tyler: The Kennedy Administration was known for going after the mafia and organized crime. How much of that did you see in Tampa throughout your life?

Norma: During that time, and before, we had a reputation for being a mafia town. And to us, the mafia was just a way of life. It was not that we didn't look at it as being bad--it was...

Tyler: Just the way it was.

Norma: Just the way it was, like we had trees in the forest we had mafia in Tampa and it was this just one of those things we didn't mess with. So we have nothing to fear and one of the great things about it... well, great, but one of the better things about it was that they would not hurt the

family. It wasn't like in later years when they would wipe out innocent people and families. The mafia at least had some, if you want to use the word loosely, some form of...

Tyler: Honor?

Norma: Honor, I guess you would call it, where the family was not to be touched and many a time, twice to my knowledge where the man was assassinated. One was in his front yard and the wife was standing next to him.

Tyler: Here in Tampa?

Norma: Here in Tampa, on Davis Island. He was assassinated, his wife was standing next to him and they didn't touch the wife. She saw who they were but of course she was not about to say who they were for sure. Then the other one was a man by the name of Velasco. Velasco used to go play poker with his friends on Friday night, while that Thursday they cleaned up the alley, so he parked in the alley. Isn't that convenient? Anyway he got through, he walked out with his wife, was going to his car and Joe Provenzano... the whole city of Tampa knew the name of the assassin: Joe Provenzano. And he walked up to Velasco, shot him a few times, killed him, looked at the wife, tilted his head, you know, courtesy of expression, and walked away.

Tyler: (Laughs)

Norma: And she knew who it was, and she tried, she tried to go before the court, she had him charged and so on. And when Joe Provenzano was brought before the court, there was some men that showed up at the courtroom and during a court recess they approached her and they told her, "I think the best thing you do is move to California." She and her two brothers, they were really going to get Joe Provenzano. This was the one time where the mafia was going to pay. Well they went up to her and they told her I think it's time that you moved to California that's the best thing you can do and by the way she did. To the best of my knowledge her grandchildren and great-grandchildren are probably still in California. So they did, they left and everybody knew why, you know we all understood.

Tyler: Not much you could do about it, huh?

Norma: I mean if that's the life you chose, that's what it was. So that's what you had in the 60's.

Tyler: It certainly wasn't an easy period of American or Floridian history.

Norma: Not at all. There was this time, I was downtown at Grant's and I was already, I would say probably my 20's, about my middle 20s and I used to go shopping and then I would shop and then I would go to the counter. They had these long counters like in the movies of the 60's and \$.30 it would give you a plate of mashed potatoes, some turkey and gravy and then the drink was extra. So I went and sat down and I noticed that the counter was empty, which was very unusual since this was on Saturday. And I sat down and I then looked to my right and looking there was stools. And I remember looking and it was at that time, I'm saying a little old lady, she could have been 50 because I was in my 20's and everyone looked old but anyway she was the petite, black and she was sitting and looking down at her hands. So the waitress comes over and she says, "Can I help you?" I said, "Well I want to order but the lady over here was before me." And

she says, "Well, we don't wait on niggers." And I thought wow, that was harsh and it kind of took me aback. Just then, I see these two guys come in through from the front of the door with these clubs like the handle of a hatchet, you know without... just the club and, and they were hitting their hands with the club. And I looked, and there were two of them with cowboy hats, I remember that clearly. I remember looking down and they were wearing boots and they walked past and I was scared because I thought oh Lord, they're going to come after me. And they walked past, and as they were walking past the woman they told her, "Nigger get out of here, you're not eating here." And I remember feeling flushed... feeling so angry and they walked right past because and came around again with those clubs and this time as they walked past her, with their elbows they rammed her and the poor woman flips forward. I was... I've heard of temporary insanity, okay, I've heard and I understand what it means because I'll be honest with you I did become temporarily insane.

Tyler: (Laughs) Oh I can imagine.

Norma: Really I did. I was not reasoning, I wasn't thinking, there was no logic. There was just sheer anger I... I can't begin to describe to you what I was feeling. And being Latin and having been through "No Dogs or Latins Allowed" at the beaches with my dad, it added more. Had I been Anglo, I probably, I don't know what I would've done. But at that moment I think I empathized, that could have been me. And I just lost it. So I grabbed the fork the woman had put down and when they came again, I walked right up to them and I called them all kinds of horrid names that you can imagine and I said, "If you touch her, I'll pluck your eyes out." I was just insane. They turned around and went out the back door and left. Grant's had the front towards Franklin and Tampa Street to the back and they walked out the back. And the black lady says to me, "You just don't know what you did. You don't know what you did." That's what she kept saying. And then, in comes the police. Perfect timing. They knew that the two guys had left and it was an excuse and, this is my opinion, that it was an excuse to arrest the woman. And they walked in and they said, "I hear there is a fight, or there's some disturbance here." And I looked at them and said, "You see a disturbance of any kind here?" And they looked at me and they turned around and they left. And that poor, black woman, that skinny little tiny thing kept saying, "You don't know what you did missy, you just don't know what you did." And I said well I may not know but I did it! I was so upset I started to cry and I left. What happened to the woman... what happened after that I don't know. But I kept walking down Franklin Street with all the stores; we didn't have malls back then, we had beautiful department stores and I remember walking down the street just walking, walking and walking and then across the street and walked some more until finally I began to breathe and feel better and I got the bus and went home. I didn't have my lunch, I didn't do my shopping but I just got the bus and went home. I remember some of the people gazing at me because as I was walking I was just bawling because I realized you know, your nerves, you realize look what you did! They could've beaten you to death. I mean so at any rate, I just went home on the bus. I have experienced in my life five different instances of discrimination, ugly discrimination and I have reacted violently to all of them. For some reason, I have no tolerance. I cannot tolerate it, maybe if I would see it today with my age, maybe I wouldn't react the same way but back then I did. We had a time there where I thought, wow, you know...

Tyler: We made it.

Norma: We got there. It's going to be simple, we'll work it out, and it's a piece of cake. Unfortunately no. But anyway we're back to square one. So, here we are... and that's Tampa, and Tampa was not without its excitement. And there's the cigar factories and so on, my mother retired in 1961 to take care of my daughter. She started to take care of my daughter when she was nine months old and then after that, you know, we went through the space-age, we went through the McCarthy era then it was not prejudice that against any race it was prejudice against what you believed. Which to me is almost as deadly if not worse. You couldn't believe what you wanted to believe because you were contemptible. And that was really a dark time in our country's history.

Tyler: What about for women? How did women fare during these times?

Norma: Women... (Laughs) it's interesting. Women was not violent, it was passive aggressive. I can tell you, when I became a supervisor for bilingual education, I went to work at the administration offices and the first thing I heard is, "Welcome to Peyton Place." Now Peyton Place was the name of a popular TV series in which everything went. You know, it was sexual it was just a really unscrupulous and immoral place and when they said, "Welcome to Peyton Place" I was kind of taken aback. But I figured if you keep your standards, it's okay. Well it wasn't okay. I went to conferences where I was... I remember I shared a room with two other ladies that were supervisors and at 7 o'clock in the morning, the assistant superintendent for administration by the name of Frank Farmer, calls me at my room and says, "Norma, I want you to come downstairs, get dressed, come downstairs and I'm going to take you to breakfast and then after breakfast, take you shopping, and you can buy anything you want. I'll buy it for you, and then we'll go up to my room." And I said really...

Tyler: Well that's a lovely offer.

Norma: And I remember I said, "I don't think so Mr. Farmer." He says he'll be downstairs in the lobby. I hung up and I remember one lady was called Grace and the other Velma, and both of them said if you don't go you can forget it, you're going nowhere. You're going to be without a job. I said are you kidding me? For real? I don't think so. My mind said that these women are saying that because they have slept around and that's their excuse. But it's not going to be mine because I don't need to sleep around. Am I doing a good job? That's going to be it, it's all I need. So my program was under the mandate of the office of civil rights, it was a government Supreme Court decision to implement bilingual education in Hillsborough County. When Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980... remember I came on the job in 1974 and in 1980, I got a call from the office of civil rights in Atlanta and the head of the office says, "Norma, start packing your bags, you're going to lose your job." I asked why? He says because it's not mandated by the government anymore and now they're going to cut you loose. They couldn't stand you but they had to tolerate you and now they don't have to do either. I couldn't believe it and I had the perfect job. Well guess what? I made the front pages on Sunday, I got up and I looked at the front page and in the front page it said, "Bilingual Supervisor", and this is the word, "has been booted" in quotation marks, "from bilingual education." "Booted" was the word they used and I'm sitting

here, on a Sunday morning reading the Sunday paper front page and there are was my name. I have been “booted” from bilingual education. And I was out. I was out. Of course I sued... and I won.

Tyler: Sued the paper?

Norma: No, sued the school system, and when I did it was Title IX, I went on Title IX. And then I remember the judge his name was [William J.] Castagna. I still have the records I don't know why I haven't thrown them away but anyway I won, we impeached the superintendent Donald Taylor and Frank Farmer. I was awarded one dollar. I still have the check.

Tyler: (Laughs)

Norma: One dollar. That's what they gave me. And months later, your mother and I were right here, there was a knock on the door and I answered the knock and it was a man that said, “You have to sign for this.” So I did and they gave me the envelope, and I opened it up and inside it was a cashier's check for \$50,000. I showed it to your mother, by the way. So the first thing I did was call... I had to lawyers: Alice Nelson and the other guy's name was Shapiro, Jack Shapiro. Anyway, I called them up I said I had the money now to pay you for your services and she said, “No, you don't have to pay me, I've been paid.” Well who paid her I asked, and she tells me, “I'm sorry I'm not at liberty to disclose.” Okay, okay well I can't go over there and grab her by the neck and make her tell me, she said no. So we went to the banks and we show them this check to find out where this came from and they said no, they wouldn't know where that comes from. Everything was anonymous. Now who, why, I don't know, it's up to speculation I have no idea.

Tyler: No idea who paid for your lawyers and gave you \$50,000?

Norma: No idea to this day. I can speculate but that's all, it's just speculation.

Tyler: Now, looking back to all your time here, here in Tampa, how... do you think we've made progress? Are we retreading the same mistakes, are we going backwards? How're we looking?

Norma: I have mixed emotions on the future. I'm hesitant to say I'm optimistic and very, when I say I am very, very cautiously optimistic, I mean just that. I am... I don't see, and I'll tell you why, as I've gotten, since I retired in 91', I've gotten more involved in organizations; I have seen how the local government works close-up; I have gotten some really good insight as to state government, how it works and frankly, in my view, it is in such dire need of a cleaning that it is unbelievable. I've lost so much respect for so many people. Greed is the name of the game, and like the actor said, “Greed is good.” It seems to be the motto. I see it at the local level, the state level, I hear them I listen to them. And then you dig, and you see these son of a guns, they know better, but they sell it. As if it was the Second Coming. The older I get, the less optimistic I become... really. I feel bad for you, and really bad for your little brother, I just don't see good things happening.

Tyler: But we have made progress?

Norma: In what areas? In science, we've made progress but the people aren't buying. In medicine, but they're overcharging us on medications. In architecture and technology and

establishing an infrastructure but we haven't done it. The only thing we have done, is we have learned how to kill people in different ways. We have wars, now we kill them in better ways; more efficient. So about the only advancement I see, that man has made, is new ways of killing people. Our masses, our public schools are a mess. Where is our greatness today? Where can I stand in awe of what is fantastic? We've given up. Well we have the space program. But I don't know, we have lost our greatness. We were once this inspiration for mankind. I feel like if a Martian were to land his spaceship on earth, and see the mess we've made, he would look at us and say, "Where's your manager." So as far as me being optimistic about the future, no. And that is what makes me speak up. I hate to sound so pessimistic, but if somebody can prove to me otherwise, I'd love to be optimistic. So maybe the burden is going to be on you. And the way I see it, I wish it weren't, but I don't see the young people with that fire in the gut. I don't see it. I want to see the young... You know what gives me hope? You're going to say I'm out of it and ridiculous. But when I see young people protesting, that they have enough passion to get up there and protest, I know they have some kind of fire to go out and stand up for what they believe. I don't care if they're supporting Trump or supporting Bernie Sanders, but it's a passion. So I'm not optimistic. But Tampa's a nice town. For being a small, little, sleepy town, I believe as you described it. We have a hockey team, a football team, a soccer team, a baseball team, and then, you know, they complain we don't support them. Our money can only go so far! But anyways, so, it's in your hands. I just hope you do a good job with it.

Tyler: It's a responsibility we embrace.

Norma: Really?

Tyler: Well, some of us.

Norma: I just hope you get that passion. And once you get that passion, once you feel it, you'll never let it go. You'll recognize it. Hopefully you will find someone who will inspire you. That usually helps. Just some figure that will inspire you, that's magnificent, and I was lucky. Every time I see pictures of Kennedy, it just sweeps me up. He inspired me to begin writing, journals and speeches. Politicians have asked me for copies of the speeches I've given, if they could plagiarize them. I told them go ahead. Sam Gibbons, Lawton Chiles, I've had EJ Salcines, they've asked for my speeches. My words are floating around somewhere. So you know, but every time I start writing I hear that voice... "Ask not..." and it inspires. Next to the Constitution and the Gettysburg Address, Kennedy's inaugural address is the most inspiring piece of literature I have ever read. Anyway, so that's my town.

Tyler: Tampa.

Norma: It's your history, your legacy. It's a great town, it has history like no other. We speak Spanglish, no other place in the world speaks Spanglish. We have a theatre that's trilingual, and no other place in the US has a trilingual theatre. We're rather unique.

Tyler: I'd agree.

Norma: We're rather special. For being held back by some, we have managed to survive the incompetency of many.

Tyler: But I'd like to thank you for sitting down with me. Thank you very much.

Norma: You're welcome, but you have a tremendous load on your back. But trust me, the day you become impassioned, your load will become much lighter. It will be something you go forth and do something about. Maybe I'll have a glimpse.

Tyler: I hope so.

Norma: Alright sweetie.

Tyler: This has been an Oral History with Norma Lobato...

Norma: Your grandmother.

Tyler: (Laughs) Yes, my grandmother. Here in her home, in Tampa, Florida, where she saw so much and will undoubtedly see so much more. So again thank you.

Norma: You're welcome, you're welcome, any time.

End