

INTERVIEW WITH FELIX MOLINA
FEBRUARY 22, 2022

LAURA MERCEDES: My name is Laura Mercedes, and I am here with Felix Molina to talk about his life and experiences in LGBT organizations in the Lehigh Valley as part of the Lehigh Valley LGBT community oral history project. Our project has funding from the American Council of Learned Societies, and we are meeting on Zoom on February 22nd, 2022. Thank you so much for your willingness to speak with us today, Felix. To start, can you please state your full name and spell it for me? Felix, you for being here today. To start, could you please tell me your name and last name and spell them?

FELIX MOLINA: Okay, my name is Felix Molina. My name is F-E-L-I-X, Molina, M-O-L-I-N-A.

LM: Could you please give me your date of birth?

FM: Three, three, '62.

LM: Can I ask for your consent. Do you consent to doing this interview today?

FM: Yes.

LM: Do you consent to this interview being transcribed, digitalized, and published online in searchable formats?

FM: Yes.

LM: Do you consent to the LGBT file using your interview for educational purposes, including films, articles, websites, presentations and other formats?

FM: Yes.

LM: Do you understand that you will have 30 days after the electronic delivery of the transcription to revise the interview, identify parts that you wish to redact, and/or to withdraw the interview from the project completely?

FM: Yes.

LM: Okay. Well, to start, could you tell me about the first few years of your life and describe your childhood?

FM: Well, I was born in Rio Piedras, which now belongs to San Juan here in Puerto Rico. I had a really happy childhood. I've known I was gay since I was little. When I was about 10, 10 to 12, I was blackmailed; they said I had to pay money, and if I didn't, they would tell my family that I was gay. I said, "Well, no, I'm not going to pay anything, so I'll tell my family." I sat down with my family - we always had lunch all together - and I told them, "Well, I want to tell you something: I'm gay. If you accept me, great, and if not, then I'll keep going, but I'm not going to change my life for anyone. This is me, so it's okay." My parents told me, "You're our son, we love you anyway." My brother told me he already knew. That's pretty much how we left it.

So, since that age, everyone -- I had already come out of the closet and talked to them. When I was 18, I had my first boyfriend. My mom would bother me saying, "You're here talking on the phone all the time. And when he's done talking on the phone, God knows where he goes out looking for and hanging out with people and all that." And I said, "Well, I'm leaving." "You can't leave until you tell your grandma." And I said, "That's easy." We went out shopping and I said to my grandma, "Look, Grandma, buy me these king-sized bedsheets." And she said, "Why king if your bed's a twin?" "Oh, I forgot. I'm going to move in with some friends and we have a king bed." And she said, "Oh, okay, I'll buy them for you if you need them." And I said, "Okay," I told her just like that, "I'm moving tomorrow for sure."

And so, when I was 19 years old, I moved out of my house. I went to go live with a friend, he was older than me. We lived together for 12 years. When I was about 25, now I was with a friend of mine, her name was Christina Hayworth. She was well known here in Puerto Rico. She was the one who founded the gay pride parade here in Puerto Rico. She and I were invited to represent Puerto Rico in the gay pride parade in New York. My cousin had AIDS at that time and so I went there to visit him and to participate in the parade. And they put me in the station, they gave me the microphone to say something. And I said, "Well, it's hard to believe I had to come from Puerto Rico to visit my cousin, and he has so many friends here, and

none of you went to visit him at the hospital, being so afraid of this disease that's affecting so many of us. We have to forget about our fears and come together again like the brothers that we are and be there for each other."

Honestly it was an honor for me to be in the gay pride parade in New York and to be on the platform. It was a great experience for me. And when I was 30, my lover and I broke up; we separated. And I said, "Puerto Rico is too small for the both of us to be here broken up," so I moved to the United States. I moved to Pennsylvania. And I arrived in New Hope. In New Hope, I met someone who lived in Bethlehem. I went to Bethlehem and then -- well, my first lover was Russian. He was Russian. In Bethlehem I met a Puerto Rican. And so, I had to go to the United States to meet a Puerto Rican who would then be with me. We were together for 13 years. We had some hard times.

When I got to Bethlehem, I realized that Puerto Ricans were mistreated. They definitely discriminated more because of our accents. But more than anything else, Puerto Ricans themselves discriminated against other Puerto Ricans. I was in an eyeglass store and there was a -- I was in the back and a woman came up, "Oh, you should put these people somewhere else to wait, they can't be next to people, this and that, they're making me -- I'm really nervous here." And the manager said, "Is he bothering you?" And she said, "No, but his presence is bothering me, this and that, I'm not going to be here, I won't come here anymore." "Well, if you don't want to come here, then don't come, but he's okay and we're going to help him." So I go and tell my friend and instead of agreeing with me, he says, "God knows if you were yelling or something or being intimidating with that voice of yours. It's the way you are, this and that." But we're really just hard on each other. I didn't say anything, I wasn't doing anything and even the store manager saw it. So, I definitely wasn't doing anything wrong.

So then, I was president -- I was chosen. I was working in the -- well, I went to work in recycling to translate all of the papers around the city into Spanish because I saw the need then for things to be in Spanish. There came the great ordinance that everything had to be in English. I fought quite a lot with Tropiano and my friend Julio Guridy because he

didn't do anything to change it. He'd say, "Some laws are dead, why keep fighting?" And I said, "Because it's completely unfair that you're saying that everything has to be in English when the percentage of people from here, there are people here, it's in Spanish, and they don't know it. So, I think you should do something to get rid of it," which he never did.

When we were working on that, I was still involved with other agencies, and I fell into the Humans Relations Commission. I was a representative and later I was the president of Human Relations. And we were getting laws directly for -- we were mostly fighting with the housing people and all that. And they came and they said -- they thought that I was going to say no, that the people were wrong, that you had to allow Latinos to have their music on loud and all that. And I said, "No, no, no. That's wrong and Latinos should have to respect their neighbors and turn down the volume, and all that." And in that way, I became susceptible to them thinking that because I was Latino, I was going to agree with everything the Latinos did and against anything that wasn't Latino.

So then, they started trying to have gay discrimination laws included in Allentown's ordinance. The counselor didn't want any of it. And one of the things that I told him -- I mean, they were debating about whether it was legal or if a pig was a domesticated animal or a farm animal. And I said, "To you it's more important to figure that out but you don't care if a gay person has rights here?" And that ended up standing out in The Morning Call because after we were -- they let us talk for a while in the City Hall because they -- by law, they had to let us. Once we were done talking, they went and changed the subject as if we hadn't said anything. So, they treated us like nothing.

Then, a while passed. The City Hall changed, the members of the city council changed, and we could reintroduce the law. And this time it did pass because of the city council members, and it was a success. In that time, I was also the president of -- well, before I was the president of the Puerto Rican Parade, I was a member. And after the parade was over it was really chaotic because the parade was on Hamilton Street, we stopped in the -- back then, we did a -- they had parties and things like that, and then at four everything suddenly stopped

and everyone had to go home. And everyone was all fired up and what they did was they started to rev car engines and walk around yelling because they wanted to keep the party going and everything. And there wasn't anything else. And we had a lot of problems because they said it would get taken away. The old members of the parade said as a punishment to the Puerto Ricans, they were going to cancel the parade for a year. And I said, "No. You don't have to punish the Puerto Rican people. And if it's cancelled for a year, it's going to be harder to start it back up again."

So, then we had the elections, and I was elected president. And I said, "No, what we're going to do is we're going to provide a place where they can get rid of all that energy." And then we did the parade and a festival after the parade. One of the things that they really insisted on was having beer in the festival. And I said, "No. We don't need anything else, so there won't be any beer, there won't be any alcohol. And we're going to have the best Latino festival without alcohol and with lots of people."

The first time we opened applications for who could participate, one of the first applications that was handed in was from Bradbury from the gay group saying, okay, they want to participate. And I said, "Of course." And we presented it in the committee and the committee and everyone said yes, they accepted, "we're going to do it just like that, we're going to have it." And Diamonz was there, Stonewall was there, Candida was there and everyone. All of them were there. The press, all of them were there to participate. We had a cultural week, where one day we were in the Puerto Rican club, another day in the bowling alley. And we did one day during the cultural week that was for gays, Latino gays, and we went to Stonewall and we went to Candida or we went to Diamonz and then we had cultural night. The cultural night would get gay. And it was a pretty great acceptance on the part of the Latino community directly towards the gay community.

On top of that, when we were getting everything ready for the parade, the mayor stopped us and he said we had to pay the police officers beforehand. But we had always paid them afterwards. We had the parade and then when we got the money together, we paid them. "No, this time if you don't give me the money right now, you can't have a parade." And as it

happens, the person who came to our defense right away was Sullivan and he gave us a 3,000-dollar check so we could have the parade. And he said, "Here's the money." "Ah, you guys are joining them?" "Well, look, I'm a good person and you want to get rid of us, here's the money; we're going to have the parade."

So, he himself wanted to join the center. He was in a union group, and I'd put them in a different spot. Politicians always went up front by themselves and everyone else went separately. And he grabbed the union people and said, "No, no, no, I want you guys next to me, you're coming with me." And I said, "The union goes in the back, where I put them." "Oh, the mayor told me that I should be here." And I said, "The mayor isn't in charge of the parade - I'm in charge of the parade. I'm the president and you will go to the back, or you won't be in the parade. You decide."

So, they stayed in the back, and everything was -- it shook everything up. We had a lot of success, we had a really great parade, at one point they almost got to -- they told us [inaudible] coming and going in a parade where Andy Montañez came. Almost 10,000 to 12,000 people came. And it was a parade -- everyone was really happy, we got lots of ads that it was a parade that didn't have liquor and so many people came to celebrate with us. Kutztown was there, people from Kutztown, the Latino group, they had snow cones, a lot of artisans came, the Puerto Rican government sent us artisans. We had a bunch of different painters and everything there, there was a lot of food. Everything went well, there was A-Treat, they served us all the refreshments. And even so, Budweiser, even though we didn't drink -- didn't order any beer to consume during the week, they always put out advertisements for us to celebrate when we had the cultural week. So even though we never consumed any kind of alcohol during the parade, they were always there supporting us.

While I was doing that, I changed to PSLC, the Pennsylvania Statewide Latino Coalition. And there, we had some police officers from Pennsylvania, from Philadelphia, who attacked a Latino man, and they punched his chest with a piece of metal and they drove it into his chest so hard that it killed him. And when we went to see -- that was in Shenandoah. It was a lot worse than it seemed. The police was in on it, people

from the police, the judge, the mayor. Everyone was in on the plot against Latinos. And the white supremacy was there.

When we went, we went in a group and everything, they were behind us following us. And I laughed at one because they were hiding and trying to see where I'd gone, and I'd ran to the back and I was behind them. And I said, "Hi." And when they looked back and saw me, they jumped. "Ah, what are you doing here? You have to have permission to be here." And I said, "As far as I know, this is the United States and it's a free country, so I can come." And the representative, the council came up and told me the same thing. And it just so happened that they said it to me in front of a federal officer. The federal officer said, "Let me have a few words with you, because you don't have to ask permission to come to this city and this isn't your city; this city belongs to the United States and we're going to check."

They did the necessary research, and it turns out that the person who'd killed the Hispanic man was the judge's grandson. And the people who were covering it all, the police and the chief of police and everything, were all arrested. Everyone left. The judge, everyone. And the mayor, everyone left. But I got a lot of letters from white supremacists, saying they were watching me, that I was bringing Latinos together and I was organizing people, that I couldn't do things, that they were watching me, that I should be very careful. And I said, "My address is public information, everything's public, so whatever you want to do, you can do it. Here I am." And they sent me letters. I had to send them to the FBI so they could check out everything that was going on. But everything was fine. They never did anything to me, so everything was fine.

Then I worked on different civil claims cases for Latinos for a while and also for those who weren't Latino, they were just prejudices because they were poor or because they were gay. And I worked with a law firm for quite a while. And then, I said, "Okay, that's enough for now." I came back -- my parents' health was declining, they were getting older. So, I said, "Let me go back to Puerto Rico to be with them," and I decided to go back and I've been back here for about 12 years now. I'm in Caguas. I'm relaxed. I'm enjoying being here with my parents. And I still really miss it because I was in

-- at one point, I was in more than 10 different organizations at once and working on all kinds of things, and now I'm not doing anything.

Now I spend my time doing riddles, watching movies, relaxing things. So, it's pretty different from what I was doing before. But that's my life in a nutshell more or less. And yes, even still, if I see any kind of discrimination, I never keep quiet, and I never will. I'll always do that, and I wish you all the best of luck with what you're doing. Thank you very much. Do you have any questions?

LM: Yes, thank you. Could I ask you a question?

FM: Yes.

LM: How did you see the relationship between the Latino community and the LGBTQ community here in Lehigh Valley when you were here working with those two aspects, with those two --?

FM: Well. I thought it was good. I don't know if it was that -- I made people respect me. I made people respect me wherever I was and everyone knew that I was gay. I mean, I went and I started the parade, I was on the gay float, we had the day for gays, we went to the clubs, we were coming and going and all that. And Latinos would get like that, but they wouldn't insult me to my face or anything; they just accepted it. And I knew that sometimes things went on when I wasn't there, but when I got there, everything was okay, everything was fine. Peaches and cream. There weren't any problems. Everything was fine and, no, we accept them, and everyone's fine and we're still great.

LM: Speaking from the perspective of the Latino community, what was it like to be a Latino man in the LGBTQ community here?

FM: It was pretty discriminatory. They saw me as, "oh, you're Latino. You have no reason to be here." It happened to me a lot in Candida. They just saw me as an outsider, like, "why are you here? You're not -- we're here -- us Americans are in charge here. You don't have that; you have to go hide in the corner or away from here and not around us. We're the ones

who tell you what you can do and where you can do it." And I saw that a lot. In the small bars, that's what happened. Outside of Allentown and Bethlehem, in the Poconos, there were a lot of small bars that you had to be scared to walk into. I mean, they'd tell you right to your face, "We don't want you here because you're Latino and you're gay. Get out of here, we're not going to serve you. We're not going to do anything. Get out of here." And it was really awful.

We couldn't do anything because we were in their territory. But I knew that around Bethlehem or Allentown I was okay but if I left and went to the Poconos, I was in a bad place, I was out of my element. So, I put up with it, knowing when to fight the fights that I had to. But yes, the gay community in Allentown and Bethlehem were really reluctant to accept outsiders. Especially the white gays, the blondes who thought they deserved everything. They're cute and whatnot, and they just don't accept others who aren't exactly like them, blue-eyed and all that. They discriminate a lot against Latinos. Even if they're gay, too.

LM: If I could ask, how did you, do you deal with that discrimination? How do you deal with it?

FM: Well, I just don't believe that I'm more than, but also not less than anyone. And I make people respect me for who I am. And I just say, "You have to value me for what -- get to know me and then we'll talk. And we're going to see each other, and I'll face anything I have to." They see me and, it's not that I command it, but I make people respect me. You could not love me, or you could not want me here, but you're going to have to accept me. It's like an old song that says it doesn't matter how you see me, but you're gonna have to love me. Well, yes, whatever you do, you're going to have to love me because I'm not going anywhere. You're going to have to accept me one way or another.

LM: I'm going to go back a little bit. How did you go from speaking at the Gay Pride Parade in New York to having all of these leadership roles in the community here?

FM: I think my father is pretty talkative and he's extremely a leader as such. And he taught me a lot of that. He was the city's Santa Claus. Since he had four kids, he had a bus and

he'd always get all the kids in and take them and he'd take us to the bowling alley and he paid for everyone, he'd take all of us out to eat. If we were having the town fair, he'd look for money to make the cathedral. And that was every year.

And when I was a little boy, I remember they gave me a book that was the church parade and they gave me the Bible for me to hold. And since they didn't come looking for it, I grabbed it, opened the Bible, and kept walking in front of everyone and, "oh, look how cute, the little Bible boy." And that was me, just because no one said anything to me, I kept walking in front of everyone and I had the Bible. And so then, they gave me the nickname "little Bible boy." So, I'd always walk in the front of the parade. But yeah, I think I've more just been following my father's footsteps, around being a boss, being -- what is it? -- a non-Native-American chief in the parade.

LM: I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the anti-discrimination law. Could you go into a little bit more detail about what you think helped that law to get passed, and what that process was like?

FM: If the city council members who were there before when it was first introduced were still there, nothing would've happened. The city changed; the people of the city asked for that change. And they asked for it in such a way that the people who had positions in the city council, they threw out the ones who were old-fashioned in their ways and replaced them with people who were much more advanced, and they put -- Candida was there in the city council -- An openly gay person.

So, they went and they completely changed the body -- the people of Allentown's mentality changed to one that was much more advanced and they said, "No, this has to stop, it has to be this way." And I think a lot of people did that because they educated themselves because they thought that -- at first, they said it wasn't necessary because it was already included. And then they learned that it wasn't included. They thought it was, but you could still get away with discrimination because it wasn't a law. A lot of people said, "Oh, no. So, I want it, yes, that's right. Then I want that change." And so it happened. The people came to speak and this time their voices were heard, and the change was made.

LM: And thinking about it now, is there anything you feel needs to be done?

FM: Well, I think it should -- right now I'm not exactly sure if the nondiscrimination law for gays is federal yet but it should be. I think still, we just had it with Trump, the white supremacists are still here and they're completely advanced. And what they defend the most, what they want the most is to divide and conquer. And they're doing that with minorities as much as they can and with whatever they can. And we also see that we have to strengthen the separation between church and state. The church, many churches, are growing and encouraging that division among the people, claiming that this is immoral, that it's coming straight from the devil and the devil is going to put an end the United States and put an end to everything because they're not doing things how they should be done.

And we have to understand that that's not what it says in the Bible, and we have to be -- I'm very religious. I always go to church. And that's not what it says in the Bible. We have to accept the separation of church and state and we have to come together so that those people don't come into power, which I'm afraid is going to happen in '24. It's going to happen to us again because they're in really deep and they have really outdated mindsets and they only have their heads in the clouds, and they don't do anything for the good of the people. They think they deserve it and that they're the only ones who know what's best for the people.

LM: Thinking about Puerto Rico, what was it like for you to be a 10-year-old kid who was out of the closet, if I could go back a little bit?

FM: Like I said, since I earned others' respect, I was the class president. Everyone knew. I was the president of the class, I was the president when I was little, I called all over the place. I was the first person in a Catholic Church in Caguas who went on strike because they weren't letting some of our classmates go in because they went to serenade some girls at a retreat and they put -- so when there were only one month left to graduate senior year, they wanted them to be expelled and not to graduate.

And we came to the agreement that they would graduate, they wouldn't go to graduation, but they had to graduate and they had to get their exams. And we came to that agreement, and I got the people going. But all of us sat in front of the school and didn't let any cars or any people get by. They couldn't get in. And that cost me the critical thinking medal. But I preferred to have my friends in their position than to have any medal that made me give up what I thought was really right for our community.

LM: How would you compare being a gay man in Puerto Rico now to in the Lehigh Valley?

FM: Well, here leaders support gay people more. They have Catholics, religious people against them saying that they're going to go to Hell. There's a new political party, which now has one or two -- they have two senators. But they're much more accepting of everything now. On TV, everywhere. But sometimes they have their disputes and negotiations, but it's much more accepted, much more popular, much more embraced. And I think it was the same in Lehigh Valley.

The only thing was, like I said, the difference between the gay white supremacists, the blonde, blue-eyed gays, against Latinos and everyone else, and here you don't see that because we're all different colors and everything. The only thing here is if you have a better body and go to the beach a lot and work out and all that, us chubby people are cast aside. But you can't do much about that. I like to eat and I'm not going to stop eating to make someone love me. If you love me, love me as I am -- chubby. If not, then don't love me.

LM: We're coming up to the end of the interview. I don't know if there's anything you haven't said that you want to say, anything you want to talk about or expand upon about your work in Lehigh Valley, about your story, about whatever you want.

FM: Well, in Lehigh Valley, the parade and my position in human resources were my hobbies, like I said. My job was in the lab. I worked at the University of Penn, I worked at Lehigh University, I worked at OraSure. I worked with Biological, working on all of the biological issues. And they asked me, how can you work in science and also look out for

the people? I don't think there's a difference. It's simply the person. I mean, science has you look at the facts in order to make a decision. And with people it's the same thing. I mean, you have to look at them and then decide how to act in front of them and how to follow them. And I was lucky enough that my bosses always allowed me to have a flexible schedule and to do all of the things that I wanted and still have that, directly.

Also, during the Presidents' Summit, with Bush, Clinton, and all of them, I was one of the representatives of Lehigh Valley. I was in Pennsylvania representing the Latinos in Lehigh Valley. That was a really great experience. I met a lot of people there. And everything was, I mean, one of the people I met there who I really liked, her nature, was Barbara Bush. She was a really impressive person, really open-minded. Her nature, the way she saw things and how she looked out for others and how she expressed herself. She was someone who really impressed me. I spent time with Ridge, the governor, Tom Ridge. He was the one who presented me with the plaque for the first Latino Award in Pennsylvania. I also have it pretty well. I had a good relationship with them, fighting for Latino issues, fighting alongside them for everything.

I was with the Dominican community. They also gave me a plaque to show that I helped them because they couldn't raise the flag or the Dominican flag in the city and they weren't allowed. And I fought for them so they would be allowed to raise their flag there. I had a good relationship with Peruvians, I had a good relationship with... Really, I didn't limit myself to just helping Puerto Ricans; I helped Latinos, gays, or anyone who was suffering any kind of discrimination on behalf of someone else, if they didn't want to talk, I did.

One time there was a baker in Philadelphia who wasn't getting paid, they wanted him to leave without paying him because supposedly he quit and was leaving. I said, "But he gave you his two weeks' notice, he trained the person who was replacing him, and you don't want to give him...?" "Oh, but I wanted him to stay longer." And I said, "But he has a son who's dying in his city, and he has to go back. So, you're going to pay him and you're going to pay him now." "Ah, but you... I came with the press." And the press said, "I didn't know you were fighting against Felix, so you better pay him because I'm not

going to fight against Felix, so you have to pay him." And okay, they paid him, and he left. So, it was pretty -- I fought a lot of fights. And I'm proud of myself for what I did to defend people and that I was there to achieve that.

LM: We're proud of you, and everything that you've done. Is there anything else you'd like to add or any other story you'd like to tell?

FM: Not for now.

LM: Last question: do you know of anyone or think there's someone else in the LGBT community in Lehigh Valley that we should interview for our oral history project?

FM: I'd say that if you want to find someone who knows what's happening now, the new stuff, a good person would be my nephew. Because he knows what's happening now in social circles, cultural circles, labor and all of that. And he's openly gay. So, he knows what's happening to people and he's working in the school district and knows about the hardships that come with that, he's living it.

LM: What's his name?

FM: José Ángel Molina Agosto.

LM: Thank you. Thank you so much for your time and for sharing, for opening up to us and telling us your story. And thanks to everyone for listening. I'm going to press pause, don't leave.