



Title: SOMOS NC: The Life of Rafael Toro

Interviewee: Rafael Toro

Interviewer: A'shiya Ramsey

Date of Interview: 10/29/2025

Series: Somos NC

Length: 21 Minutes

Spanish Summary of Interview:

En esta entrevista para el proyecto *Somos Carolina del Norte*, la estudiante de UNCW A'shiya Ramsey conversa con el señor Rafael, un veterano puertorriqueño de 75 años. Él habla sobre la historia de Puerto Rico y Estados Unidos, su infancia en distintos países, y ofrece consejos sobre la tecnología, el cambio y la importancia de los valores familiares.

English Summary of Interview:

In this interview for the *Somos North Carolina* project, UNCW student A'shiya Ramsey speaks with Mr. Rafael, a 75-year-old Puerto Rican veteran. He shares the history of Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States, his childhood experiences living in Puerto Rico, Germany, and the U.S., and his reflections on change, technology, and the importance of family values across generations.

Start Transcript

[00:00:00] Ashiya: My name is A'shiya Ramsey. I am a student at UNCW, and today, I am doing a interview with mister Rafael, and he will tell me a little bit about his life. And this is for the project Somos, North Carolina. Okay, mister Rafael. I'll let you start. Just tell me about your life in Puerto Rico, if that's ok?

[00:00:23] Rafael: Okay. Well, first of all, you gotta understand the history of Puerto Rico.

[00:00:29] Ashiya: Yes, sir.

[00:00:30] Rafael: Okay. Back in 1898, the Americans captured it and took it over for themselves during the Spanish American War. Okay? They let Cuba decide what they wanted to do with it. They let the Philippines decide what they wanted to do with it, and then they held on to a couple other islands in in in the in the Pacific. But in in the Caribbean, just like the Spaniards did, they saw Puerto Rico as a stepping stone, as a gateway, as a path to protecting the Caribbean. Okay? And then they had, during that time too, talks of the Suez Canal had been built. So again, this was a shorter route between the Atlantic and the Pacific where you didn't have to go around South America. You can cut right through. So, United States was eyeing that. To protect that. So, that's how we get started in Puerto Rico after four hundred years of being subjugated to Spanish rule. All of a sudden, we were under another colonizer, another another imperialistic country that took over over us. Even though we were granted sovereignty about a month or so before the Americans landed. Spain had cut us loose and said, you guys are on your own, unfortunately. Since that case, that's why another reason it gave the Americans an easy way to come in and just take over the island with very little resistance.

[00:01:59] Rafael: Alright? So that gets started there. So Puerto Rico turns over to The United States in 1898. We were pretty much ruled by a military government. Things started to change. And just let me bring up at that point, Puerto Rico was 5050% black and 50% white. It was quite an even chance, alright, before that started. Slaves had always been around and people had always come over, and the population was very well evenly matched on that aspect. Alright? Those years pretty the first beginning of the twentieth century were kinda tumultuous. People didn't know what to do. They had the what's called the Mexicanos or Gringos or the the Mexicans call them. Take over the island. They established a provincial government. They did all these things. But then World War one comes around. Right? And in 1917, they granted Puerto

Ricans citizenship. We became American citizens in the 1917 so that we our men could go fight in World War one. I have a great great uncle who fought in World War one, and I also come from a very military background.

[00:03:20] Ashiya: Mhmm.

[00:03:21] Rafael: Okay? So so that happened back in in in 1970. We become citizens and Puerto Rico pretty much just still gets ruled by provincial a American government, by governors, and people such, and they started to explore it in our land. The main crop was sugar. Mhmm. Alright? We had coffee there, plantation. We had pineapple companies there, and it was pretty much all taken over the whole sugar plantation, the whole island, pretty much have got divided up into three parts, three major, actually, four major sugar plantations took over and the main crop was sugar. Okay? So that pretty much will give you a foundation where we're at.

[00:04:04] Ashiya: Right.

[00:04:04] Rafael: Alright? So I was born in 1950 right after World War two. Mhmm. Okay? I'm 75 years old.

[00:04:13] Ashiya: Wow. You don't look like it

[00:04:14] Rafael: Alrighty? Exactly. And your last question that you got down on the paper was something people are often surprised to learn about you?

[00:04:22] Ashiya: Yes, sir.

[00:04:23] Rafael: That I'm 75 You were surprised.

[00:04:26] Ashiya: Yeah.

[00:04:27] Rafael: I tell people my family found the fountain the secret to the fountain of youth.

[00:04:31] Ashiya: I'm gonna need the coordinates.

[00:04:32] Rafael: It's a bottle of rum. It's in a bottle of rum. No. I'm only kidding. Okay. Alright. I told that to everybody. Alrighty. So, you asked me your first question was actually, what was it like to be born in Old San Juan? Well, first of all, you gotta know that my parents, a little bit background about my parents. Okay? My father had enlisted in the United States Army the day right after Pearl Harbor. Mhmm. Him and his buddies, and I just like about a 100 other young men in the whole United States and their playhouse, they went and they joined the war. Mhmm. K? My father is from the Southern part of the island, Southwest part of the island. He's he's from Guanica. Okay? Guanica was the place where the Americans landed in 1898 to take over the island. And the town that my father lived in was one of those large plantation sugar mills. It was a sugar mill. And my grandfather was one of the engineers to keeping the the I'm a say Molinos, which is grinders to crush down the sugar into liquid to make it the the plantation. He was in charge of that, and we had a house out there. So my father goes to the army, and he meets up with my mother in Old San Juan. My mother's from Old San Juan. She did her high school there. And my grandfather, my her her father was a bill collector for a reputable club at the time, and he was a musician.

[00:06:04] Rafael: Alright? So the first five years oh, and then the other thing about me at those time is that I was born in what is today the cultural the building, the Cultural Institute of Puerto Rico. That building in Old San Juan used to be the hospital for what is what was called Fort Brook. And that is at the tip of El Moro, San Felipe, the Castillo, the big fortress. You've seen that fortress that's out there in San Juan? You haven't seen the fortress. It's a huge fortress. Alright? It's at the tip of the mouth of the Bay Of San Juan. Alright? And right behind that is is Old San Juan. Alright? So the army took over the the fort and took over the and made it into a base. And I was born at that hospital along with my sister who who came along a year after I did. So, basically, the first five years of my life, I was I had received lots of love. I received lots of care. Lots of attention. I pretty much all got spoiled because I was I'm a say this phrase in in Spanish, a Negrito Favorito. Okay? You got the message? Yeah. I'm not the the nice n word. Means pretty cute, cute Negro. Alright? Negrito. Little Negro.

[00:07:23] Ashiya: Yeah.

[00:07:23] Rafael: Correct. Spanish. But doesn't sound the same. It's more of that one. I remember my days between my living in my in old San Juan on Calle Sol, which is right in the middle of the whole thing. I remember traveling from the the North side of the island where it's where where for San Juan is at to Guanica where my other grandparents were at. And you had to go over a road. You had to go over the mountains. It was a beautiful drive. It took four hours to get to drive from one side to the next. Now you can make it in less than two hours. Because of Martin Highways and things like this. Alright? So my father was stationed in in in Fort Brooke at the time. He had served in Panama. He had protected the Panama Canal during World War two. And then he had come back to Puerto Rico and he met up with my mother who was just recently out of high school. He my father was a sergeant and then I was born. So my life was and then my father's family, there was a large we had a lot of relatives. My mother's side side didn't have that many relatives. But over at my father's side is where I found my most joy. I had a big house. I had a beach. It was close to me. Water was very important to me on that aspect. So, yes. So my childhood was very I I I like I like I said, I got a lot of attention. I got a lot of attention during those time that were going on. Then we moved to Germany. My father got orders to Germany. And that became I was rather shocked. I mean, these are they say that your the fundamental years, your first twelve years are your fundamental years, and anything that happens, good or bad, will affect you later on down the line. So during the first twelve years of my life, I had to move 12 six six different times.

[00:09:12] Ashiya: Mhmm.

[00:09:13] Rafael: Alright? So there's a certain nonstability. And it just was wasn't across the neighborhood or to a different apartment. I moved geographically. First place was Berlin. Alright? And what do I remember about Berlin? It was cold. It was cold. But I love it. I remember going out. My mother used to bundle me up as much as they can. And I would I wouldn't come back into the house until I was frozen. Alright? Until I was late for it. I was I was, like, five years old. In Berlin, I learned to ice skate. I learned to ride a bicycle, and I learned to swim in the Olympic Pool in Berlin. Alright? Because if you know anything about Berlin, Berlin was divided up into sectors right after World War two. Alright? And we lived in the American sector. And and luckily for us, Olympic Pool and Olympic Arena was at in our side. So we had privileges or opportunities to go there and swim. And at five years old, I was swimming in the Olympic Pool in Berlin. Okay. It was very pleasant. We we were we were treated like royalty. I remember we we were going to church on Sunday. We had to get totally dressed up with a shirt and tie.

[00:10:22] Rafael: Afterwards, we would go to the NCO club and have a tremendous meal. So we were we were treat treated like real the Germans really loved us. They loved my brown skin. Alright? They would always bring the guards and then we even had a maid. She'd bring us chocolate and candies for us. My sister and I had that there in Germany. So, it was a very positive experience when I went to Germany. After Germany, we moved back to Puerto Rico for a year and I had to enter a school which didn't go too well for me because, again, I've been adjusting. Then from Puerto Rico, my father got orders to Atlanta, Georgia. K? Atlanta, Georgia, another geographical location. And he was stationed at Fort McCullough. Right now, that fort is where Tyler Perry's movie studio is at. Okay? And we and I live right outside that studio. And Georgia for me was totally opposite of Germany. It was hot. Okay? And we didn't get no attention at all. We were kinda isolated and and left us long. We lived in a white community, a white pretty pretty much all in a base housing, housing for for the people that worked aboard the base.

[00:11:41] Rafael: And and I also we also got to go to we had to go to a Catholic school in Atlanta, Saint Anthony's. We did I did my first and second year there grades at same second, third, and fourth grade in Atlanta, Saint Anthony. So again, there in Georgia, I I called Georgia my Huckleberry Finn days. Alright? Because it was so hot in my house. I would I would be the first one out the house, and I was gone all day. I had a creek next to my house. I was playing. I I was running going to forest, running all up and down Atlanta, Georgia, Atlanta, and get to the spike called. I was lit. I would come back when my that spike called. Was lit. I would come back when my fifth my father would whistle. My father had a whistle, alright, that he would call us, call me and my friend, and I would come over and respond. So, again, Georgia was I went to school. I did my first and second grade there. And it and the other thing that happened there, my mother got to ride on the front of the bus

[00:12:47] Ashiya: Oh, wow.

[00:12:48] Rafael: Back in 1968. Yeah. Because she spoke Spanish. Her her and her friend were gonna go downtown to Atlanta to get some hair products, and they got on the bus and they're speaking and they got to sit around in front of the bus driver. They didn't object at all to them even though my mother is like us. I'm like, my my okay. So that was Georgia. After Georgia, we go back to Puerto Rico. I do my third grade in Puerto Rico. So again, to a different geographical location and not not Old San Juan but somewhere in the vicinity because he got stationed at the same place. And I did another year of school down there. And then from there, he got orders to Seattle, Washington or actually Tacoma, Washington where Fort Lewis is at. Mhmm. Alright? He got orders to the to the fourth army division. And there, I did my fifth fifth grade in in

Washington. And then in 1962, my school was selected to go inaugurate the Seattle World's Fair. Okay? In 1962 because his division was gonna be sent to Vietnam. The whole division would be in Seattle just at the start of the Vietnam War. But he he didn't get to go to Vietnam because he was already retired, so he didn't go. He retired in he retired in Tacoma, Washington.

[00:14:11] Rafael: Tacoma was fun. It was a different atmosphere. People were more conjoin. There was there were more mix of people. I I rode my bike every day to school, which was in the same pretty much a neighborhood that we lived in. It was a board based. I had a lot of positive experiences that I in Washington. I swam. There was I got to climb Mount Rainier, two things that that that other people wouldn't wouldn't even think imagine. From Washington, my father retired. After twenty years of service, and he wanted to keep us in English speaking countries or in America. So we moved to New York Okay. Where we had family. A lot of this I ended up going to Puerto Rico, and I did four years of my college, my undergraduate at Inter American University in San German, Puerto Rico. I did my my bachelor's degree is in education, and I minored in history. I minored my history minor. My seminar in history was on the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico. Was 1973 when I graduated from college. It had been a one hundred years since they abolished slavery in Puerto Rico. Even though all the other countries in the world had abolished slavery twenty years way before Puerto Rico did. K.

[00:15:30] Ashiya: And so, like, with your, like I'm guessing, in your life, would you say that you've seen the world change tremendously, or would you say that things now are not as different from they were from what they were back then, if that makes sense.

[00:15:51] Rafael: Well, definitely, the world has definitely changed. Alright. Definitely changed. I mean, here in Wilmington, it has changed. I I I moved down to Wilmington in 2015, And the the in the last ten years, this town has really grown.

[00:16:08] Ashiya: Yes, sir.

[00:16:09] Rafael: Really, really grown and expanded. Currently, I am the precinct chair of the Democratic party, and I have one of the largest precincts in New Hanover County. My precinct covers from Gordon Road all the way up to Scottsville along Market Street, crossover to Cape Fear Community College, back down to Laney High School, and then back over to to Market Street.

[00:16:33] Ashiya: That's awesome.

[00:16:34] Rafael: Alright. And I have this crazy highway dividing my precinct in half, and we only have one voting place. Mhmm. So that's what I've been doing here lately on that one. K?

[00:16:43] Ashiya: And how did you come across that position in determining that this is something that you wanted to do?

[00:16:50] Rafael: Well, I've always I've always had like five year plans.

[00:16:54] Ashiya: Right. Okay.

[00:16:55] Rafael: In my life, I would make five year plan. I'm gonna do this. I wanna accomplish this in my five year. And then right before I retired, I I had, like, a ten year plan. I knew I was gonna be tired ten years before the date. That's why I keep telling you, don't never lose sight of that date.

[00:17:11] Ashiya: Right.

[00:17:11] Rafael: Alright. I don't know how. Right? And that day have to be when I turned 65.

[00:17:16] Ashiya: Right. Yes sir

[00:17:17] Rafael: Okay? So that's that's, you know, you know you you can't it's in unavoidable. You're gonna get older and you're gonna reach that date. And that's date that you celebrate your accomplishment on that journey. That's my advice to you because you made it. Alright? You successfully made it on that aspect.

[00:17:33] Ashiya: This is coming to an end. Sadly, I have one more question that I want to ask you. What is like, what advice can you give my generation? What advice would you give us?

[00:17:47] Rafael: Alright. So my generation went to the moon.

[00:17:52] Ashiya: Yes, sir.

[00:17:53] Rafael: Your generation is going to Mars.

[00:17:56] Ashiya: Oh my.

[00:17:57] Rafael: Technology. Yes. I think you guys gotta master technology. Right now, like I said, I started in marine corps with communication, which is pretty much of the technology. A computer back in those days was the size of a room. Right? We're now we're wearing computers on our watches and all this. So we've come a long way from that time. So technology. Know your technology thoroughly. Stay motivated. Stay fixed to where you're going to. What you wanna accomplish. And there's always opportunities out there for you to grab a hold of it. But I think the most important thing that I wanna really emphasize is the family values that you have because that's about the only thing you have to fall back on. You can have friends, which are a dime a dozen, or you can have family that are worth millions. They for for life, they will never leave you. They will love you. And when they depart, you're saddened, and you remember all those bad things. So keep it keep an eye on on that. Take advantage of all opportunity. And again, you you guys are going to Mars. So technology in a new world, everything is unbelievable. Look at look look at this what we got going on here.

[00:19:06] Ashiya: I know.

[00:19:06] Rafael: We're seeing what's. It's amazing. We don't gotta meet in person. All the transaction now with this whole new thing with AI to it over. You don't know who you're really talking to. So this is what you guys got to navigate. The world is is growing. The United States is being tested. Alright? The democracy and this republic is being tested because this is an experiment in a new form of government. Civilizations prior to their to prior to their getting

great, alright, were ruled by one family, one individual. Alright? And now we decide to have representations to decide how to protect us and how to care for us with our tax money.

[00:19:53] Ashiya: Right.

[00:19:54] Rafael: So that's very important. This is what I say. But technology to me is really ruining everybody. There's no more physical contact. There's no more outgoing. The pandemic did hurt. And it really separate us even more Mhmm. Of that aspect.

[00:20:09] Ashiya: I agree. And then we only have, like, four minutes left, so I have to close. It was awesome talking to you and hearing about your experiences. I hope and I pray that my life is as eventful and successful as yours is. And thank you for your service. I I I respect you for all that you have accomplished, and thank you for taking the time out and talking with me.