

DSNY INTERVIEW BETWEEN JACQUELINE COLOGNESI AND EDWIN NIEVES
CONDUCTED MARCH 29th, 2011
MANHATTAN 2 GARAGE
EDITED TRANSCRIPT

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: It is March 29th, 2011. I am Jacqueline Colognesi recording this interview for Robin Nagle's [DSNY Anthropologist-in-Residence] oral history class and I am here with...

EDWIN NIEVES: Edwin Nieves

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Edwin Nieves. And we are completing an oral history. It is about 1:10 pm and we are at the Manhattan 2 garage. So I guess to start, I just want to find out more about your background, and where did you grow up?

EDWIN NIEVES: Well I grew up in Brooklyn, New York. I was born in Puerto Rico in Bayamon and my parents brought me here when I was like 3 months old. So I really don't know too much of Puerto Rico. So, I'm a New York-Rican I guess.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: (*Laughs*) What year was that when you came to [New York]?

EDWIN NIEVES: I was born on May 27, '55. So I came in '55, probably around July or August.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: How long did you live here in Brooklyn for?

EDWIN NIEVES: I lived in Greenpoint for around 35 years and then I moved upstate to Monroe, New York, where I'm living now.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What made you decide to take the sanitation exam?

EDWIN NIEVES: Well, I was 19 years old and this test was given at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in Greenpoint. One of my friends picked up applications and I just happened to fill one out and give it in. The date to take the test he called me and got me out of bed to go take the physical, and here I am now!

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: When was your start date?

EDWIN NIEVES: My start date was July 29th, in 1985. I took the test in '74 but they froze the list for like nine years because of the budget. You know, no money. So I waited eleven years to get called.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What did you do in between?

EDWIN NIEVES: Well, I liked to work outdoors. So I used to be driving trucks outside, you know, outdoors. I don't like to work indoors. So this is the perfect job for me! (*Laughs*)

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: How [does] this job compare to working in the trucks before you started in sanitation?

EDWIN NIEVES: Well, this job is very good. I like it because when you're on a route, you get to meet people. You get to see kids growing up, from birth. I've been on the route 25 years, so you get to see little kids growin' up. They keep running to the window when they hear the trucks. They always like to hear the noise of the white trucks. Meeting the people on

the route, it's one of the good things about the job.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Do you have anyone in particular that stands out over the years?

EDWIN NIEVES: Yes. We pick up Sarah Jessica Parker's garbage, so when James was born... He would always run to the window. So we seen him from I guess two months old, six months. Once he was able to walk, once he heard the truck, he would run to the window and he'd be there, wavin', and Sarah would come wave. Stuff like that, it's fun. And who else did we see? Matthew Modine lives on the route and they're all great people. You get to talk to them personally. It's good.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Did you start in this area?

EDWIN NIEVES: No, my first garage was in Harlem. I stood there maybe three months, then I transferred to Bedford-Stuyvesant because it was closer to home. And I was there, Bedford-Stuyvesant, around twelve years. I've been here the rest. Thirteen years.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Which year did you transfer from Bedford-Stuyvesant to here?

EDWIN NIEVES: I guess it had to be around '90... '92? '92, '93.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What would you say are the main differences between working in different neighborhoods?

EDWIN NIEVES: Well for one, Bedford-Stuyvesant was a little more dangerous. It was a lot more drugs there, so you really had to be careful around what you pick[ed] up. But the people in the neighborhood was really nice. In Manhattan, you got more traffic so you've gotta be careful when you come out of the truck so you don't get hit by a cab or anything. But the work is about the same. It's just [the] neighborhood's different.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: In terms of the cars and the danger, have you ever come across any close calls?

EDWIN NIEVES: One time. It wasn't a car, it was just that I stepped out of the truck and put my foot in a hole a little. It was a little hole in the street. Good thing I had boots on 'cause I woulda sprained my ankle pretty bad. You're supposed to look before you leap like they say. That's about it, really. I try to be very careful.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: So you've been in the Village now for how many years?

EDWIN NIEVES: I would say around 13 years now.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: And how long were you working with Angelo [Bruno] in the village?

EDWIN NIEVES: I was with Angelo around seven years. Through Angelo, I got to meet a lot of people. He was on the route 25 years, so he knew everybody. And he's [a] typical Italian, gets up to everybody, kisses everybody. I became the kissin' man with him. Kissin' old ladies, babies. You name it, we kissed it. *(Laughter)* It was fun working with him.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Do you miss working with Angelo?

EDWIN NIEVES: Yes. When you work with somebody that long-seven years ain't really that long, but it is long-with one partner, you get to know his habits. He knows my habits, I know when he had a bad night, he knows when I have a bad night-without saying a word. It's like

marriage, I guess. Marriage is harder. *(Laughter)*

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What is it like working with new partners?

EDWIN NIEVES: My new partner's Marc Murphy. I think he mighta been one of the youngest kids to come on the job. 'Cause when he started working here, he wasn't even allowed to drive the truck to Jersey, because that's interstate. You had to be, I think, eighteen, or nineteen, and he wasn't even that [old] yet. I went from Angelo, who was around 58, to somebody that's-Murphy's around 26 now. *(Laughs)* So, you learn a lot from Angelo, and I hopefully will teach Murphy a few things.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What do you talk about on the route?

EDWIN NIEVES: Where we're gonna start the route. [We] talk about sports, I'm into sports, he likes sports, so we talk about sports, how your weekend was, what did ya eat for dinner, stuff like that.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What's it like to do this every day? Could you describe a typical day?

EDWIN NIEVES: A typical day, say like today for instance. Roll call is six o'clock [am], you get your route. By 6:15 you're usually at your route, and so you start your baskets. [It's] is the first thing usually on a route

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Could you describe baskets?

EDWIN NIEVES: It's the corner baskets. The green cans that are on each corner. So basically you hit every basket that's on your route. So usually when you turn into the block, that's the first thing you hit. We try to go where people don't live, when it's that early, 'cause you don't wanna wake them up. So, you do some factory areas, you work your way [to] where people don't really live, 'cause you don't want to wake them up at six in the morning. And basically you do the route the same way, 'cause people set their clocks by ya. Some days they'll be telling you, "Oh, you're late today." So we try to do it the same way every time, basically, so you don't miss them.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Do you have a favorite, a best or worst day on the job that stands out?

EDWIN NIEVES: My best day on the job is Friday. And my longest day is Saturday. Mondays are pretty heavy. Mondays are short distance, but more weight. Usually the first two pick-ups and the first pick-up of the week is the heaviest, which is Monday and Tuesday. We do each route three times a week. Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday. So the first two pick-ups of the week are usually the heaviest. And they'll usually go the longest. You get extra work, like on a Saturday and a Friday.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: When it's the heaviest-this is a really physical job...

EDWIN NIEVES: Yes. Monday, we used to be doing like thirteen, fourteen, tons of garbage a day. And now, your typical day on the route-for some reason, it's got lighter. I don't know if it's people moving out of Manhattan and not coming back, but now your typical day is around eleven and a half tons, twelve tons.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: How is that on you-the physical toll on your health?

EDWIN NIEVES: Well, I don't have to join a gym, 'cause you're always moving. The worst time to

work outdoors, for me, is when it's raining. It keeps you in shape. One guy drives, one guy loads. When it's a lot of bags, the driver comes out and you work together. Usually whoever's the closest to the steering wheel will jump in the truck and move it to the next stop. That's a good partner. You try to each do the same amount. My partner Murphy, he's so much younger [that] by the time I get back to the back of truck, there's no garbage left.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: How does the job change when it's snowing out?

EDWIN NIEVES: When it's snowing out...to tell you the truth it's easier than doing collection. You're inside the truck. They give you a route, and [in] Manhattan, [in] our garage, West Street is the main thing. You do the avenues-those are called primaries. West Street, Broadway, all the avenues you try to hit first. The secondaries are like the side streets so that's typically your snow route. You try to do by the bus stops, hospitals, fire department, with the spreaders. You try to hit them areas pretty fast [on] one of the first times going out.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What's the spreader?

EDWIN NIEVES: The spreader is the salt spreader. It's the big orange truck that has a plow and lays down salt. The plows are the big sanitation trucks with the plow [in front]. Usually [the snow] gets pushed to the right when you start. The spreader, though, is basically [for] when it's less than two, three inches on the ground. You can't plow it until there's three or four inches on the ground, so the spreader's one of the first things to go out when it snows.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: So they go out right after it starts snowing?

EDWIN NIEVES: No. Sometimes, when they know it's gonna snow, you got stand-by spots, so you go on stand-by. One truck will be on Canal [Street] and West Street, one truck will be on West [Street] and Bloomfield [Street]. One will be up on Fourteenth. They're pre-positioned, to hit the route. They spread 'em out through the district.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: This past winter, you worked many days in a row after the big storm.

EDWIN NIEVES: This past winter is the longest I've worked straight without a day off. Which was 49 days straight. My first day off, I was sick as a dog. (*Laughs*) Couldn't get out of [bed]. I'm almost on the job 26 years, that's the most [days in a row]. The money's good, but it takes its toll, I'm very lucky that my parents live in Greenpoint, because I live upstate. I'd never make it home, so I stay at their house a few times during the week, which makes it easier.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What are you doing when you're working 49 days in a row with the snow?

EDWIN NIEVES: Well the first thing is the plowin'. I basically like to go out on the spreader because it's what I know. I know my route will be clean. I'll usually go on the spreader. After the spreader, you're plowin', the next few days. Until they open up the street, they won't pick up any garbage or recycling, so that's put on hold. Usually after a big snowstorm, for the first week you're just really pushing [the snow] to the right. Then, when it gets warm enough, you're pushing the snow back into the street so that the cars can chew it up. That's how you get rid of the snow. After that the rough part starts-you gotta start looking for the garbage, between the cars and the snow piles. That's the hardest part of the job.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Why would you say that part is the hardest?

EDWIN NIEVES: Because you're never on solid ground. You're between cars, you're between snow banks, and the cars don't move over here [in Manhattan], so you're basically working between cars and snow. It's a lot of work because the garbage hasn't been picked up in over a week or so. You can load up a truck in one block. It's hard after the snow.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Definitely. So when you load up a truck after one block, do you have to bring it back to the garage every time?

EDWIN NIEVES: Usually when it snows you're working 12-hour days. It'll take you sometimes that long just to fill up the truck. You're moving very slow, because of the snow, trying to get in between cars. Some blocks you might not even be able to get down because the cars are sticking out. Usually load[ing] up the truck takes the full 12 hours.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Was that 49 days of 12-hour shifts?

EDWIN NIEVES: Some were twelve. Some were ten-hour shifts. One was like maybe fourteen. For the first few days, it's usually twelve-hour shifts. Then it goes down, to ten. The less snow on the ground, the more you can do, the less time you need to be working. It takes its toll, it the roughest winter I had so far.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Compared to past storms...

EDWIN NIEVES: Past storms-'96 was pretty heavy too. It just kept comin' on the weekends, so you never really got a break. But this was the worst.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: There was also the media fallout. The sanitation slowdown allegations.

EDWIN NIEVES: Well, I'll tell ya the truth. In Manhattan we never even heard of it. Everybody has their opinion, but between me and you, there was no slowdown. They were saying it because the supervisors were gettin' laid off. You go out there and you work. I know if I was workin', I would want my block clean, because God forbid there's a fire. The fire truck's gotta get through, [the] ambulance. If there was a slowdown I didn't see it. Not in Manhattan. It was very stupid if there was, [for] safety reasons.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What about other major events that were in Manhattan. 9/11? How was working after that?

EDWIN NIEVES: 9/11 was rough. I was able to see the towers going down. People walking [up] West St were stopping in the garage just to clear their face. A lot of things went through this garage. We were gassing up ambulances from Virginia. It was a rough time. I happened to get to go down there, the day after, 'cause we were front-end loading, and it looked like something out of a movie. It was unreal.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Would you say that's the hardest thing you've ever had to deal with, or? How does it compare to other events?

EDWIN NIEVES: Oh yeah, that was the hardest. One of our worker's brother's a fireman. I was down Canal Street, [and] he came down there looking for his brother 'cause he seen the fire truck right next to where we watched the Twin Towers. His brother's passed away. He was in the Towers. Seeing him looking for his brother, that was pretty hard.
Another thing-right across from St. Vincent's, some lady threw a newborn in the

garbage can. Somehow, they found out. They had to bring the truck to the garage floor. Dumped it to look for the infant, and they found it. It was very horrible. Looked like a little stuffed animal. Right across from St. Vincent's. And all they had to do was leave it there. Oh, that was hard.

One of the worst things I hadda do is pick up dead dogs on the route one time. We were in East New York, I was outta town. It was like the dead dog detail, there was a lotta dogs there. Somebody was killin' dogs, I don't know. Our job was to go ride around, there musta been like around 10 dogs, we had to pick up. And, I was with one lady, which, I'll tell ya, thank God she was with me, because, I threw up, I couldn't pick 'em up. She went and threw the dog in the truck. I was on the side pukin'. That was probably the strangest thing I had to do.

That was in around '87, '88. I was outta town, I was in East New York. Sometimes you go to other zones, which is what's called out of town. You know, your garage might have enough guys for that day, another garage might need some more people so you go outta town. If you go from Manhattan to Brooklyn, you get like four hours in the books, [which] you can use to take a day off. Every eight hours you can take a day off. You can accumulate.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: They just sent you out to specifically like get the dogs?

EDWIN NIEVES: Yeah, they told us where to go, so...there was some dogs around there. Sometimes you get there, it ain't there. I don't know what happened, but that was probably the worst thing I ever, probably the worst detail I had to do. And being behind a horse on Thanksgiving.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: During the parade?

EDWIN NIEVES: During the parade, yes. Picking up the horse crap.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: You do that in the truck?

EDWIN NIEVES: You're out and just walkin', with a big can carrier. You gotta do it! You gotta do what you gotta do. That was probably one of the smelliest jobs I had to do.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: (*Laughs*) How often do you get something like that, [where] they pull you off your route, and say you have to do the horse for the day?

EDWIN NIEVES: A lot of times, parades, they need so many people, so each garage has to send so many people. Sometimes it ain't by your choice, that you get [sent] there. Manhattan sees how many people they need in their garages, and they take from each garage. The ticker-tape parades, they ask for volunteers, like when the Yankees win. A lot of people want to do that. Everybody in Manhattan can't do it, so they take people from Brooklyn, all over. 'Cause then they won't have nobody in Manhattan to work.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Is that something you would volunteer for?

EDWIN NIEVES: Yes. Yankee fans-it's fun. 'Cause you get to see them, you know, in front of the crowd. You ain't behind the crowd, you're on the side, waitin' til they go by, and then you do the cleaning up. So you get to see them better. You take their pictures, too.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What [are] some of your favorite memories from being on the route?

EDWIN NIEVES: The Halloween parade's fun. The Gay Pride parade-those are fun. Usually the Gay Pride parade, it's hot out, so it's nice out in the street. It's crazy. You think you seen it

all, but you'd be surprised. The parades are fun. It's work, but it's fun. Everybody's having a good time, usually. Like I said, the worst time for me [is] workin' in the rain. The rain stinks. *(Laughter)*

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What's bad about working in the rain compared to other [seasons]?

EDWIN NIEVES: The rain, it's cold, you gotta wear them rubber gloves. When you're trying to pick up the bags, they're slippery. There's times there you go pick-up the bags and you punch yourself in the face. You know what I mean? You try to make sure nobody's lookin', but it happens. I've punched myself in the face and almost knocked myself out. Cause you're trying to lift them heavy bags, and it gets slippery, with the rain. And you gotta wear your rain gear. In my experience, I don't like the rain.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What's the rain gear like?

EDWIN NIEVES: It's pretty heavy. Heavy rubber. You need a top, and boots. It's something to keep you dry, My raingear, it's good. You have to go cheap. You could go buy cheap raingear, and you get wet more with the raingear than without. It's heavy, it gets hot, and it's just not fun working in the rain.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What about working in the summer? Last summer [2010], for example, it was 90 degrees every day.

EDWIN NIEVES: The summer's good. Usually in the summer everybody's happy, everybody's joggin' around. As long as you have your water you take your time, nobody rushes ya. We've got very lucky that now we have air-conditioned trucks. When you go to the dump, you're in the air conditioning, when you're used sweatin' your butt off going to Jersey, 'cause we dump the truck in Jersey. The newer trucks have got a better ride, and it's got air conditioning, so summer ain't that bad.

We got air conditioning in the past two years. Driving the truck to Jersey, you can't have the doors open, so you could sweat. There's times that people were almost passing out, that's why I think they got the air conditioners in the truck. It just gets too hot. In the summer the only thing bad about working is that garbage is cookin' in the back of that truck. After awhile you get used to the stink. And the rats.

The rats, they're usually just hanging out in the garbage. When you're on the route long enough you know where all the rats are. When you used to have the cans—now, there's a lot of the garbage in black bags. But when you used to have the cans, you used to kick the can—not the game—it's kickin' the can, waitin' for the rats to come out. And then you would dump it. Now, they're usually right in the bag. I happened to have a rat run across my arm and jump off my face. I was dumping the can, and it came out the bottom of this plastic can—but it happened so fast that you don't even really have time to react. If I woulda seen it comin' I probably woulda had a heart attack.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: As New York pests go, now that we have the big bed bug infestation, do you take special precautions?

EDWIN NIEVES: Well, now, when they throw out the mattress it's supposed to be wrapped in plastic. Hopefully that helps. There's really not much protection you can do. You have your gloves and you just try not to rub it against ya. If it's gonna get on you, it's gonna get on you. You can't see it 'til it's too late. *(Laughs)*

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: I had been reading, I had read one article, I think, you know the exhibit that had just been done, downtown? [CHASING SANITATION¹] Someone had mentioned they pulled out—they found a diamond cross in the trash once.

EDWIN NIEVES: You do find stuff in the garbage. I really don't know jewelry. I could be throwin' gold in the trash. Every once in awhile you'll find twenty dollars in the corner baskets. We deal with Bleecker Street, where you got a lot of the bars. On the weekends, people throw their cigarettes away, and then their money goes out too, so every once in awhile you find money in the corner basket. There's a few times we found somebody's cell phone, keys. We're happy to be able to return the cell phone, 'cause, it's a pain, you know. A lot of people don't keep them numbers [and] all your numbers are on the cell phone. You lose them, now you're out all them numbers. I'm one of them.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: If that's the kind of stuff you find, how [has] the West Village changed over the course of [the years] since you've started?

EDWIN NIEVES: Before, it seemed like a lot more people were living here. I think they were able to afford it. Now, I just think, people [are] just getting out priced. You just can't afford to live in Manhattan. They're going to Greenpoint, Williamsburg,- the north side [of Brooklyn]. 'Cause it's cheaper. It's getting lighter. The weight's getting lighter, the recycle's getting lighter, so it's gotta be less people livin' in Manhattan now, than it was, eight, seven-eight years ago. We used to do like thirteen, fourteen tons, fifteen tons, on a Monday. Now we're down [to] like, twelve, thirteen, so something had to happen. I would just think that people are movin' out, and not coming back. And they're building more. So I don't, you know, there's a lot more buildings, but nobody's moving in.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What would you want to tell people about your work?

EDWIN NIEVES: Well, I'd say it's one of the best jobs in the city. I'm glad I took the job, I'm glad my friend got me out of bed to go take the test, 'cause if it wasn't for him--when you're nineteen years old, you ain't thinkin' about work. (*Laughs*) I wasn't. So I've got to give him credit for making me go take the job. It's one of the best jobs in the city. It's good, the money's good—the benefits [are] good, you're outdoors. 95% of people you work with are good. You can't get along with everybody. That's one of the best things I ever did. One of the best things in my life is to take this job.

I got a funny story. I went to Catholic grammar school. And you know, the nuns they would get arrested for what they [did] at that time. So one nun said, "If you don't do your homework, you're gonna grow up to become a garbage man." Little did she know. 'Til this time, I still remember it, and that was 40 years ago, when she said that. That's one of the funniest things I remember, about growin' up and the job. It's a great job. It's good.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: How did you feel when you got the [job]? I mean, 11 years later-to look back?

EDWIN NIEVES: I was very lucky, because we did move. We did a big move. We moved from 260 to 262, so we moved one door. My card telling me I got the job got delivered to next door, where somebody knew where I lived and they brought me the thing. It was good news 'cause that year, my daughter got born. It was good to know I had a good job, a job with decent benefits to start off with. That was one of the best news I had. First, my daughter, and then the job. (*Laughter*)

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Do you feel like there's anything kind of misunderstood about sanitation work?

EDWIN NIEVES: I think some people get offended when they call you the garbage man. We're not garbage. Yeah, we pick up the trash-we're sanitation workers. So, when people call you garbage man, some people get offended. Besides that nobody really is bothering ya.

They're glad to see ya, I'll tell ya, at times, especially after the snow. You run out of places to put the garbage, or the recycle. When they see ya, you're the best sight they see in awhile. Besides after seeing the snow, we're the next best thing they can see. When we come down the block, they're waiting for you.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: How has working in this department changed over the years?

EDWIN NIEVES: When I started, there were no ladies on the job. So I started in '85, so ladies on the job came on at, I think it was '87. So when they came on, they changed the test, the physical, made it easier. Which good for them but it was hard for the guys because now everybody gets a hundred. So now, it's like a lottery. Where [back] then, it was actually was physical work, so you got graded by what you could do. With the women, they made it good, 'cause now they can't ask the guys to do more than the women. *(Laughs)* That's one of the ways it changed. You're getting a lot of younger kids on the job now. Where, like I said, they froze the list for 10 years, so when I got on, I took it at 19, and I got called. I was 30 years old, so basically, at that point, there was a big age difference. Everybody that was on the job was over 30 years old. Where now, you can get kids 18 years old on the job. Still live at home. So that's one of the differences. That's about it for that.

When I started in '85, the best thing to do [was] to try to learn all the equipment, because, it'll help you in the long run. They asked me if I wanted to learn how to do the mechanical broom, and I said sure. I had a great teacher-Brewington-he taught me how to do the mechanical broom, and for the first five years on the job, I was doing the mechanical brooms. Which was good, 'cause my seniority didn't mean nothing then. Nobody could bounce me outta the position, where I was doin'. I was working nights. It was steady nights, and it was good. After awhile I started training people on the mechanical brooms. It was hard, because I'm a bad passenger-you try to teach somebody how to use mechanical brooms, hopefully not hittin' the car or nothing. It was fun learning the mechanical brooms

Then, I worked in the garage. They taught ya how to do the front-end loader, they said, "load up the spreaders." The only thing I really didn't learn is the wrecker. It's what they send to get the trucks when the trucks break down. One reason I didn't want to learn that is 'cause when I started, one time I broke down-and it must have been ten below, and this poor guy had to come with the truck, and get me started, and—when I see what he had to go through, I said, "I'm never gonna do that." So that's one thing I didn't wanna learn, was the wrecker. But the more equipment you learn, the better off you are, because then you have something to fall back on.

Bedford-Stuyvesant was a little rough, because like I said there was a lot of drugs there, so you had to be careful what you grabbed [because of] the needles [sticking out of] garbage bags. And shootings. One time I broke down on the mechanical broom at three in the morning, on Fulton Street and Nostrand [Avenue]. At three in the morning it looked like midtown at twelve o'clock in the afternoon. And I didn't get out of that broom until a cop came out. At that time, there was no cell phones, so if you broke down you had to go look for a phone that worked. I said, "I'm not looking for no phone. They're either gonna come lookin' for me, or a cop's comin' by." That's how I got outta there. *(Laughs)* I had to wait for the cops to come so I could call the garage. But the people that lived there, they're really down to earth. They appreciate ya. It's like Manhattan. People are people. Manhattan, Bedford-Stuyvesant, they're all good people.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What year was that, with the car breaking down?

EDWIN NIEVES: It had to be '87. It was rough at that point down there.

EDWIN NIEVES: Would you say that, doing sanitation in New York in the '80's was a lot different from when Giuliani started in '94?

EDWIN NIEVES: Well, in the '80's it was rough. There was always a lot of drugs and all that, but Bedford-Stuyvesant was one of the roughest areas at that time, because there was no work. People were just hanging out. The grown-ups, they were very nice. Three-quarters of the garage was black. They were the nicest people to work for. You can't judge people by their cover. Everybody starts off in the same line. That's how I look at it.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: You have to work your way up, to be supervisor right, you have to go through all the ranks?

EDWIN NIEVES: Not really. Every few years, they give out the supervisor's test. You can take the test, you don't really need to have ten years on the job to take the supervisor's test. You take the supervisor's test, you do good, you get on the list, and they can call ya. For instance, I think this one lady got on the job in '87, took the test like six months after she was on the job and got the job. But that's hard because she could be book smart, but ain't job smart. It's hard to have somebody that hasn't two years on the job trying to tell somebody that has 20 years on the job what to do. It's rough in that sense. It's good that they can get their feet wet first and then tell ya what to do. But all in all, all the supervisors- you get along with everybody.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What do you think makes a really good supervisor?

EDWIN NIEVES: A good supervisor is one that did what you did [and] got their hands dirty. As long as they communicate with ya, and they tell you what they expect from you...A supervisor's job is rough, because you gotta deal with the community board-everything starts from the top down. I wouldn't wanna do [it], to tell you the truth. It's too much responsibility. With me, we do something wrong, it's on us. If we do something wrong, he gets blamed for it. All in all everybody gets along, there hasn't been no problems, especially in this garage. This garage is good.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Is it better than ones you've worked in the past?

EDWIN NIEVES: It's a smaller garage. Bedford-Stuyvesant was a big garage, so you really didn't get to work with everybody. Here, it's 78 people on the job, so you get to work with everybody. It's smaller, so you get to communicate a little better, and see what everybody does. A big garage, everybody has all their cliques, and all that, where here everybody's basically the same.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Do you ever see each other after work?

EDWIN NIEVES: I live upstate, so I don't really see so many people. But a lot of the people working in this garage live in Staten Island. So they hang out. As a matter of fact here we got a uncle [and] a nephew here. We hang out sometimes, during work. *(Laughs)* Sometimes you finish a little early [and stay]. There's a weight room inside. Personally, I don't really hang out too much with people from the job. After work. I just like to get home. *(Laughs)*

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Earlier you had mentioned not having seniority when you're on the broom, that you couldn't get pushed off?

EDWIN NIEVES: When you get on the broom instead of your route then you got a broom tissue. A broom tissue is like, say somebody with more seniority wants to do that broom, they can't bump me off because I got a tissue. That's what saves you from people with more seniority. They couldn't bump me off nights, because I had the broom tissue. That's one of

the reasons to try to get the broom tissue for me. Because this way I knew I had a steady route, and I'd work steady nights, where my seniority didn't really mean nothing.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: So if you were on the truck instead, you would be able to get pushed.

EDWIN NIEVES: On the truck, the more seniority you got, the better a route you got. You make more money workin' on the truck then doing the corner baskets, so people take the truck. Everything's money. The mechanical broom, there's no money involved, but, like I said, when you're starting new, on a job, it's something good. This way you don't get bumped around.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Would you say that it's a good way to build seniority?

EDWIN NIEVES: It's a good way to have a steady shift. It worked for me.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: [To be] be clear, if you were on the broom the seniority from that would carry over into starting on the truck? [Or] would you have to start new?

EDWIN NIEVES: Your seniority starts when you get on the job. When you get a tissue, your seniority don't really play any part. Cause if you got the broom tissue, and you have a broom route-a guy with 10 years on the job can't bump me off my route.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: How would you describe the term tissue?

EDWIN NIEVES: Each job...they got a wrecker tissue. All you do is wreckers. Wrecker is you go out on wrecker calls. You gotta G. U. tissue. G. U. is garage utility. Broom tissue, you drive the mechanical broom. It's just the type of job you do.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: From my understanding... I thought it was an office job. But it's on the field?

EDWIN NIEVES: It's on the field. The tissue don't mean office job. Sometimes, say you're hurt, and you go on a tissue-there is a tissue like that, but that's medical tissue.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Did you get hurt on the job ever?

EDWIN NIEVES: (*Knocks on wooden table*) I've been lucky. But people have got hurt. Especially with the snow plow. One time in Brooklyn one of the plows wedged against a guy's finger [and] chopped his finger off right under the knuckle. I wasn't there that day. People get run over, their foot gets run over by the truck tire. Glass. A lot of people get hurt with glass. [It's] rubbin' and stickin' outta the bag, and you're swinging' the bag and it rubs against ya leg. So, glass is a pretty much one of the ways people get hurt a lot on the job. You gotta watch the way you lift, too. You could pull out your back.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: When you first start lifting, is it tough getting used to??

EDWIN NIEVES: When you start the job they send you to Randall's Island. That's where you go for a week before you start. And they try to teach you how to lift the bags and all that. The thing is, if the bag is too heavy, you can leave it...you *try* to pick it up. It's usually a hundred pounds- between two of youse you can usually lift a hundred pounds. But sometimes these bags in the projects can be like two or three hundred pounds. They look like body bags. You try-nicely- to tell that guy that, "the bags are too heavy, can you cut it in half?" Usually, if you leave them once, they'll make it lighter. It's good to tell 'em to make it lighter. They usually will, 'cause all they gotta do is bring one of them bags that

day. We gotta pick up the whole route. Most of them bags in Manhattan are pretty easy to pick up. The people are good. They use the black bags, they tie it, and they usually give you a little handle on the top where you grab it. You grab the garbage from the top, never from the bottom. They're very heavy black bags and when you grab it from the top and you throw it in, it won't spill. The other way [from the bottom] you're putting your hand under there. You don't know what's in that bag, so you try to avoid as much contact as possible [and] just grab it where you can. The really long bags, usually they give you a little handle, a little area to grab. That's basically how you lift the garbage. Not many places have cans anymore. They basically put it all in a black bags. Which is better for us.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Do you know when that started, the use of black bags instead of can?

EDWIN NIEVES: It probably started with recycle. With recycle, the clear bags are like for the paper, the blue bags are for bottles, and the black bags are for garbage. It's a way to identify what's in the bags, so you don't have to go through every bag. With the cans, they gave you stickers to put on 'em [the cans], but after awhile, they stopped giving out stickers. It was easier for them to just buy the blue bags for the bottles, the clear bags for the paper, and the black bags for the garbage. Makes it easier for us. You don't have to go through every bag to see what's in what.

Well, with the recycling, they put [it] in a blue, plastic can. And they try to put [it] in a green can, for paper. Youse open it, and look, and most of the times they oblige by it. Usually on a recycle day too, they have supervisors. So enforcement, they go around, and they check to see if the people are recycling. We get recycling Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. It used to be a Saturday only run. One paper truck. But recycling, in other districts, [is] probably every day. Each area has one day. Our garage, it's divided between the East and West side. Sixth Avenue's our cut-off side. So everything on Sixth avenue to the Bowery, it's [the] east side. Everything on this side of Sixth' is the West side. Like Monday, Wednesday, Friday, you're working on the East side, and Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday's the West side. So you don't have to do too much drivin' around.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: When you're doing the driving, do you switch the driving and the lifting on and off with your partner?

EDWIN NIEVES: A good partner usually takes turns. It's only fair. I'm a driver, my partner Murphy's a loader. But that's only a name. You don't do it that way. Some garages work for 20 minutes up, 20 minutes down. Over here, it's whoever's closest to the wheel. One day, he could come in tired, I'll do the [loading], vice-versa. You work it out with your partner.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Have you ever had a partner in the past that was not a good partner?

EDWIN NIEVES: Yes. It's hard, especially, when you're on the truck-it's bad enough liftin' the garbage all day. When you can't get along with a partner, that makes it even worse. But very rarely, that happens.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Is it easy to switch if that happens?

EDWIN NIEVES: Not really. If you can't get along with the partner, then you could go on baskets, which is no money involved. That's a way out, but I'd rather make the money. I can deal with it for a few hours, eight hours.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Do you change partners, just when someone retires?

EDWIN NIEVES: When somebody retires they change partners. Transfer periods come every once

in a while. Whoever has more seniority that transfers in, they should make the truck. The more seniority you have, the more choice you have for what collection route you could get. My partner's a shop steward, so I'm lucky. They can't bump him off.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What is a shop steward?

EDWIN NIEVES: Our garage has three sections. Shop steward's really more for when we used to have sections out in the field. The shop steward would go there, tell the men what's goin' on, and what's that. With this garage, everything's coming out of one spot. Shop steward, their job is to go to union meetings, keep you updated with what's goin' on with the union. And so the union says he's guaranteed a route. No matter how much seniority he has, he's guaranteed a collection route. Angelo was a shop steward, and now Murphy's a shop steward. Right now there ain't that many transfer periods, so you're usually good on your route for a year. Maybe longer. But I've been on the same route for eight years.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Do you have a good route?

EDDIE NIEVES: I like it, I'm in a good section. I got NYU, I got Bleecker Street. The people on the route's nice, the route's good. It's clean, not that bad. I like it. Chinatown, it's a little harder. It's heavier. And then you got from Eighth street to Fourteenth street. There's more big buildings there, so it's heavier work, but less driving. Where in Chinatown, it's heavy, and a lotta driving, and a lotta traffic.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: You can retire after 20 years? But you've been on about 26 years?

EDWIN NIEVES: End of July it'll be 26 years. When I started, it was 30 years [to] retire, and they gave you a choice to buy in to 20 years, so [the] majority of the people bought into the 20-year pension. What that meant was, that they would start taking out more money each week to cover the 10 years that you're gonna retire earlier, for your pension. There were the few that decided not to buy in. I did it just to give myself a choice to leave earlier at 20 years. Right now, I'm looking [at] maybe one more year. My wife can't retire, my mortgage ain't paid off yet, I got one more year. I don't know what I wanna do after this. I like what I'm doin', so if the body hold out...*(Laughs)* As of now, I'm think...27'll probably be...my retirement. Hopefully.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: If you wanna talk about what it means to you, to do this job...

EDWIN NIEVES: I get a nice satisfaction when you go out on the route and all you see is piles of black bags. And then when you get to the end, there's nothin' left. It's good to see that it's clean, 'cause people appreciate it. You look back, and you're like a magician, makin' it all disappear. That's one of the good things.

And clearin' the roads in the snow, cause you know people need to get to where you're gonna [go]. The one bad thing is when you're plowin' is-you got no choice-but you're plowin' to the right all the time. And there's somebody trying to get their car out, and they're shovelin', shovelin', and I gotta go through. That's hard. A lot of times, if he don't have much more to shovel, I'll wait. But you really can't. You gotta keep clearin' the streets, so that's one of the hardest things, though, seein' them shoveling and then you just push it back on 'em. A lot of times you try to lift it up. You gotta clear the street, that's the first job. I hate to do that. 'Cause I can't see, puttin' in an hour, shoveling the car out and then, have some truck come and push it back. That's what's hard about Manhattan. Upstate, your cars are off the streets. Manhattan, in the city, it's hard, because there's nowhere to put the snow. And people, they go, "Why you doing this?" That's my job. What can you say? I try not to look, but...you gotta look.

In the Village, it's a little hard, because it's narrow. You got a lot of narrow streets. I

would imagine the Bronx is hard because you got a lot of hills. The snow ain't the problem, the worst thing is the ice. You can deal with 12 inches of snow, but you put two inches of ice, and it's a different ballgame. I had a spreader that was just sliding. I'm in the spreader with all that salt, all that weight, and the truck is sliding, 'cause the streets are slanted to the curb. And you have to drop your plow, so you don't hit the car. So, that's the worst thing. The hardest thing is when it's ice. The snow ain't no problem.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: We're talking about the Village and they're [the streets] really narrow, are there any streets that spreaders or plows just can't get down?

EDWIN NIEVES: Spreaders are the big ones. There's a few streets that they call it the insert, it's like a small spreader. It's like a pick-up truck with the salt on the back on it. So, those are the ones, they'll go into them streets. For instance, I got Gay Street, which is very narrow. You can get in the problem is, when you're coming out of the street, when you're turning, if there's a car over there, you can't get out. Chinatown, it gets very narrow, so they use the insert, send [it] down there. Or they send the spreader without a plow they used to, but now they got the little plow for them little streets. Which we don't have enough [of].

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: What happens if it gets stuck, do you just leave it there? Do you back up?

EDWIN NIEVES: This past snowstorm was the first time trucks were getting really stuck. You have a radio you call on. Usually, a guy with a front-end loader will come and give you a push. Basically all you need is a push, so they'll get you unstuck. This is the first time it was very bad, 'cause of the blizzard. I was stuck with a plow, truck. Even with the small spreader. They sent the front-end loader which is like the fork. FEL, they call it. And they would just give you a little push, and you would get goin', but that's about it. I think I only got stuck maybe two or three times in 26 years.

You know what blocks not to go down. Like Charles Street is narrow, by the police department. You try to look, because if you don't think you can get through, it's hard to back out. Once you get there, if you have to avoid them, you avoid them. And let the supervisor know. He usually knows because they're always driving around. Usually all the blocks get hit pretty good.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: [Added question] Is there anything else you would like to share?

EDWIN NIEVES: The main thing...the people appreciate ya. That's one thing I like and seein' the kids growin' up. You're seein' the lady when she's walkin' down the street with the belly and then a few months, later, six months later, you see a little kid, bein' pushed in a stroller. She's walking him, imagine. It's a miracle. But seein' the kids growin' up, seein' people get old...they all appreciate ya.

The funniest thing is when my partner was telling people that he was gonna retire, right? Angelo. The day he was retiring, we were going down the route, he was saying good-bye to people. The people were crying, he was crying, and I was crying because they were crying. Everybody was crying. They didn't want him to leave, because he's been there—he was doing the route like 25 years. And there were people sayin', why are you leavin'? Why? One lady- we went six blocks, and six people tell 'em your crazy for retiring. But, after 30 years, your body starts taking its toll. He was startin' to hurt. So it was time to retire.

And, we were lucky-we got into one movie, *Made of Honor*. Me and Angelo were in it. With Patrick Dempsey. It was in Soho. It's in the first five minutes. You're gonna see a mechanical broom, and then you're gonna see two people throwin' garbage in there, and that was me and my partner. It was like within the first five minutes. It was fun. And then they did a few other things with us. Something green? I don't even know. It was really him.

Angelo, whenever somebody needed a tape, they came to Angelo. And I just happened to be with him.

He was probably my best partner. I learned a lot from him. You think you know everything, but you don't. And, I just hope Murphy learns from me, from what I learned from Angelo. You know, you pass it down. But the hardest part of the job is sometimes, is getting in from me. I come from upstate, it's an hour ride. By Woodbury Commons.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Oh that's really far.

EDWIN NIEVES: That ain't that far, probably an hour ride. *(Laughs)* So...that's about it.

JACQUELINE COLOGNESI: Thank you very much.

EDWIN NIEVES: I hope you get an A!

FOOTNOTES:

1. Chasing Sanitation: Falling in Love with New York's Strongest- Exhibited at 411 Lafayette Street from February 15-27, 2011. www.chasingsanitation.com