



My City

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When I joined the military, the question of where I grew up often came up. Although not all the comments were negative, those are the ones that stuck in my head. Responses like, “Oh!” and “Wow, you grew up in the city, you missed a lot!” Other times there were no comments; however, their facial expressions clearly gave me the impression that they thought I had missed out on something. On the contrary, I feel very fortunate to have grown up in the “Big Apple,” the “Melting Pot!”

I am of Puerto Rican descent. I grew up in Manhattan, otherwise known as Spanish Harlem. My neighborhood consisted mostly of Hispanics, some blacks and whites.

My mother and the Catholic schools I attended exposed me to people of all cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. I consider it a blessing to have been exposed to so many differences. Diversity was all around me. The neighborhood in which my grandmother lived had more whites than my neighborhood. On one street lived a gay man, and on another a transsexual. They were accepted and befriended by the community. While in my young mind I knew they were different, I also knew that they were two of the kindest, funniest, most genuine individuals I’d ever met. Johnny was a nurse, and Sugar owned a hair salon. As kids they kept us entertained, and I always enjoyed being around them.

Summers in New York City hold many fond memories for me. My ears can still hear the roaring laughter as the streets filled with us children entertaining ourselves by playing many games like red light-green light, hide and go seek, hopscotch, jump rope, tag, hand ball, and yes, the ever popular spin the bottle! We’d play until we were called in for supper, often begging if we could eat later. While there were trips to amusement parks and beaches and other sight seeing adventures, I think it was the simple things like playing together that we enjoyed the most. The days often brought heat and extreme humidity, while the nights brought thunderstorms that would cool off the night air, bringing with it a wonderful breeze, making for a great night’s sleep. The evenings also brought families together. The adults socialized, shared

stories about their childhood with us and then we were off playing together for hours and hours, until we exhausted ourselves, always feeling safe and carefree. It was one of the few times my mother allowed me and my sister to stay up past our bed time.

New York City is rich in culture, food, diversity, and the arts. As a child, it was such a fascinating city. Central Park was within walking distance. The Museum of Natural History, Radio City Music Hall, Broadway, 42 Street, all within reach. It all seemed almost magical. My mother introduced us to all of it. There was so much to see, so much to do. I could never tire of New York.

New York offers an incredible variety of foods. I can still taste the delicious, cheesy, generous portions of pizza slices served at the local pizzerias. It was a common hangout for the neighborhood kids. After we'd enjoy the pizza, we'd have one of my favorite treats, Italian ices. At every corner there was a hot dog stand. There you could find everyone, from families, students, to blue and white collar workers buying what we New Yorkers refer to as frankfurters with the "works." We had some of the best Italian and Chinese restaurants. Spanish Harlem had what we called "cuchifritos." They are pig's ears, blood pudding sausage, rolled deep fried mashed green bananas, stuffed with meat and olives, and also deep fried, potatoes stuffed with meat and olives. Another local favorite was fried plantains.

Then there's Christmas in the city. Wow! There's no better place to be! Rockefeller Center, the lights, the tree, the spirit, the shows, the hustle and bustle! It was all so exciting. It took my breath away. I didn't even mind the bitter cold temperatures the winters often brought.

Some believe that we are a product of our environment. If that is so, then my environment taught me to be accepting of the differences in others. It also taught me that we, as individuals, have something to offer our neighbor. I have been told by friends and co-workers that I have a very easy going personality and that I get along well with others. I believe that's due in part to how and where I was raised.

It's been said that since 9/11 and the recent blackout, there is a new-found respect for New York and New Yorkers, but I have always been proud of being a native New Yorker and of growing up in the city, my city!