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Carlos Flores

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Desde el Mero Medio

Armitage Avenue in the early 1970s, looking eastbound from the top of the L train stop.

SHADES OF LINCOLN PARK:
ARMITAGE AVENUE IN THE 1970s

by Carlos Flores

I would like to dedicate this photo-essay to the memories of those individuals who are no longer with us, but were part of this experience. They included: Juan Rodriguez, Daniel Rodriguez, Miguel Ríos, Manuel Ramos, Tony Crespo, Orlando Quintana, Cabo "Cabito" Cruz, Luis Figueroa, Andrés and Papo González, Ralph Rivera, Pancho Lind, Boquete, and many others.

It is hard to believe that 35 years have gone by since I arrived as a 10 year-old from Guayama, Puerto Rico to this big metropolis called Chicago. I distinctly remember sharing an apartment with my parents, two sisters, and a brother. This apartment was located at the corner of La Salle and Superior. A few years later the family moved to 1714 North Larrabee (near North Avenue), and I have fond memories of my youth attending Newberry and Arnold School; participating in the activities at the Lincoln Boys Club (corner of Orchard & Willow) and St. Michael's church; visiting Lincoln Park Zoo, North Avenue Beach, and the Chicago Historical Society almost every day during the hot summers; and playing baseball at the Old Town Little League in Lincoln Park.

It was in the early 1960s when Puerto Ricans began their large migration into communities like Lincoln Park, Westtown/Humboldt Park, Lakeview, and other communities throughout the city. The area where Puerto Ricans began to
settle in Lincoln Park was bounded by North Avenue (South), Racine (West), Clark Street (East), and Fullerton (North). My experience of living on Armitage Avenue began in 1967 when my parents purchased their first property, a 6-unit apartment building located at 1128 West Armitage. Today my parents continue to live at this location.

Growing up on Armitage Avenue during the 1960s and 1970s provided me with some memorable and wonderful experiences. I consider Armitage Avenue (between Halsted and Racine) to be the main artery of the heart of this community. It must have been some divine intervention that I was chosen to document the many faces of Puerto Ricans living in this community. Armitage Avenue was the backdrop for many of the images that I captured through the eyes of the camera.

Life on Armitage Avenue was very simple (there were never any problems finding a parking space), and there was a true sense of community. Families related to other families, children played with other children, merchants and business owners knew their customers well. In other words, you knew and you interacted
with your next door neighbor and with their families.

There were many Puerto Rican/Latino merchants who established their business on Armitage Avenue in order to meet the demand of providing services to many of the Spanish-speaking families residing in the community. For example, you had Arroyo's Restaurant (front cover photo), located under the Armitage elevated train stop. Arroyo's Restaurant provided some of the best *cuchifrito*, rice & beans.
Luis (Little Louie) Rodriguez, Fingers, and Gilbert (Karate) Vargas hanging out by the Young Lords Organization Headquarters (a.k.a. Armitage Avenue Methodis Church) on the corner of Armitage and Dayton (early 1970s).

and rellenos de papa, as well as provide a place where people would gather to catch-up with the bochinches (gossip) taking place around the neighborhood.

Armitage Avenue was also the home Arroyo’s Liquor Store, two record shops (La Estrella and Rosario’s Record Shop), and at least 4 bodegas (food mart) that included Armi-Day, Mario’s Food Mart, and Luis Bodega located on Armitage and Kenmore. The headquarters of Los Hijos Del Diablo (Sons of the Devil) motorcycle club was located on the 1100 block of Armitage and Big John’s Restaurant/Bar on Armitage near Clifton was the home of Willie’s Tavern.

Puerto Rican/Latino families living in this community were hard working families, with many of them living on the verge of poverty. I always felt that these families took the initiative to instill pride, dignity, love and respect in their offspring. This was reflected in the attitudes of young people growing up in this community.

Even though young Puerto Ricans/Latinos growing up in Lincoln Park belonged to various clubs/gangs like the Continentals, Young Lords, Black Eagles, Paragons, Latin Eagles, Latin Kings, and others, we lived and played together without any sense of danger from each other.

As a product of that environment I must emphasize that the experience of growing up in Lincoln Park during the 1960s and 1970s served as a great lesson in teaching me to become a compassionate and caring individual towards the Puerto Rican/Latino community. I am very proud to have been a part of the entire experience.

Carlos Flores is Coordinator of Project Kalinda at the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College.

At the Armitage Avenue train stop, Benny Pérez, Richie González, Ralph Rivera, and Tony Lugo welcome Néstor upon his return from the Armed Forces (early 1970s).