

Nuts and Bolts: Stories from New Britain Manufacturing
Connecticut Humanities CT at Work Project
CCSU Students Ian Ranaldi and Mary Ellen Murray
Interview Subject: Clara Banos
Factory subject worked at: P & F Corbin
Date of Interview: February 8, 2014
Location: Clara's home

Interviewee: Clara Banos

Location: Clara's living room, in her apartment in New Britain, Connecticut, on February 8, 2014.

Description: Mary Ellen and I interviewed Clara Banos, a 73-year-old female, originally from the country of Cuba, in a comfortable setting in her home. In her twenties, she, along with her two children at the time, came over to America and first settled in New York, then came to New Britain, Connecticut without any knowledge of the country or even how to speak English. She first began as a social worker after picking up the English language quite quickly, and then acquired her job at Corbin where she excelled, which is elaborated in the interview. Clara is an individual with great pride in her accomplishments, which include starting fresh in a new and strange country, making money to support a family (money was her utmost goal), and never getting a penny from the government through welfare or food stamps. Clara is very grateful for this country, believes it is the best in the world, and calls it "my country." Clara is a very religious individual, who credits most of her achievements and longevity to God. She has a display that shows this faith with a crucifix, lit candles, the Virgin Mary, and sets of Rosary Beads. Let it be noted that Clara is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, and at some points, the interview was repetitive on certain subjects, exact memory's and time frames weren't fully remembered, and the interview was taken off course a few times. However, plenty of information was gathered on this amazing and strong woman's life.

Interview:

How did you get your job in the factory?

"First of all, I worked for, you know, helping people and then my husband was working at Corbin. He was a supervisor there. Then one day I quit the office and went down there and put in an application and they hired me. I was cutting keys."

So what was your day-to-day work like?

"Like I told you it was a very rich town and we had 3,000 people working at the factory and the money we were making was good. It was supposed to be three hundred keys an hour and I was cutting about six or seven hundred, so I was turning 200% so the days I didn't want to kill myself I already had hours done. That was fantastic for me. For me it was about making money."

So how did you cut the keys?

“It was a big machine. It was a long thing and the machine would have a dial with numbers, and it had a place that would open and you would put the key in there and then you put the numbers. Then press, and the thing would come down and cut the numbers.”

Was it a dangerous machine? Did anyone ever get hurt working with the machine?

“No. You could not get hurt because the machine had like a glass thing in front where the cutter would come down.”

So you were protected from it?

“Yes. It was fantastic.”

Did you work in a group of people? Or were you pretty much solo when you worked?

“We had a lot of people working in there, but it was not a group everyone got their own machine.”

Did you guys talk throughout the day?

“We could hardly talk. It wasn’t because they (the supervisors) wouldn’t let you talk but you had to be concentrated where you put the numbers (to cut the keys).”

So you enjoyed your work? You liked it?

“I did because I made money! That was my important part, kid. Like I said a young girl in her twenties who doesn’t know English, a strange country, my goal was making money. And I tell you guys I am proud of myself. Never had the government give me a penny.”

How long did it take you to learn English?

“Maybe...I don’t know, but I think it was fast. In those years, you gotta learn.”

The Occupational Safety and Health Organization, OSHA, had established guidelines for work safety but sometimes workers were encouraged to override the safety devices for the sake of working faster for more product and money. Did you experience anything like that or did you feel like all the safety rules were enforced?

“All the safety rules that were in there were enforced. There were no problems with the company.”

But you still managed to work really fast while being safe.

“Oh yeah.”

Were you ever part of a timed study where they’d see how many keys you’d make in an hour or was it just regulated by the company?

No not really. There was a lot of freedom in those years. You did your job and nobody was on top of you. That was it.

How did you get paid? Did you get paid in check or cash directly?

No we had checks.

And how much did you get paid weekly?

“Oh jeez in those years I was making good money but I do not remember exactly how much I was making. But I was making such good money that in no time I could even buy a brand new house.”

So you thought it was enough to live comfortably?

“It was enough.” (Spoken firmly) This was, I tell you guys, a rich town, a very rich town.”

Conversation ensued when she when back to when she first started at the factory:

“When I left the job in social work and helping people in an office to go to a factory, it was not easy. Exactly in the beginning when I started, they put me in the worst department. It was a machine where you put the parts in, press a button, and then it was sprayed with oil so I had to have a big apron, things in my head, but I did it. My goal was making money so I didn’t care.

How long did you work in that part?

I didn’t for long because my husband was a supervisor, and it’s a union so when you start they aren’t going to just give to you, so I think they kept me in that department for about three months and then I moved out to cutting keys.

Did you socialize with members of the factory outside of the workplace?

“Yes we did. We had birthdays and we could go and take the person out just like we do right now. Exactly the same way, but I believe it was better in those years. One hundred percent better.”

So your husband, was he in a Union?

“No, he was a supervisor.”

Were you in a union?

“I was in the union, yes and the union was good.”

So you felt that they had a positive impact overall?

“I never used it to tell you the truth, I was always a free lady. I never used the union for anything. To use a union, it was the people who made trouble. They had problems with the supervisors and they go to the union but I never did that, I didn’t need it.”

So you weren’t part of any strikes?

“When there was a strike in the company you had to go. Everybody has to go.”

So you participated in a strike?

“I had to.”

But your heart wasn't in it?

“No not really because I was in two places. I was working for the union and my husband was working for the company. So we would mind our own business.”

So you didn't like when the strikes would happen?

“No not really, but I had to go like everybody else. I would like to sit at my machine and make the money and when we're out we don't get paid.”

Many of the companies that were based in New Britain began opening up centers in the South because it was cheaper labor. Did you ever travel down there and visit one of the factories or work in one?

“No, I only worked up here. That started after I retired.”

So when did you retire from Corbin?

“I can't exactly tell you but maybe it was in the seventies because I got sick.”

If we can ask what was it?

“Nervous breakdowns.”

Was it hard for you to let go of working there?

“It was, it was because you have to get used to it. The money, you aren't making it anymore and you have to get used to a lot of different things.”

So it was like anxiety that you were dealing with?

“Yes.”

When did that start?

“I was younger to tell you the truth. Thirties probably.”

Did anything set it off or did it just start happening?

“It just started happening. It's just like the Alzheimer's, it comes to you. It could be worse but I'm a tough woman, I don't let anything bother me.” **(Branched into faith)**
“Nothing bothers me at all as long as I am alive. I believe in God. I even studied the bible completely. I believe in God, that's my number one.”

So your faith was a big source of strength for you.

“It still is. There's not a day that I open the door down there and walking to the senior center talking to God. My tears will want to come down but I tell you, I don't know how people could live today, and they don't even believe in heaven. That's my number one. Walking to the senior center, I look to the sky talking to Him the whole way there and I pray for this world, I pray for my children, and I thank Him for every single day. Even with my Alzheimer's right now, I'm not giving up. I still drive, I'm not going far away but I don't give up. This is my true story. This is the country where I fight for everything, but it gives me everything too.”

So you feel grateful at the end of the day?

“I do. And I am proud. I brought my whole family here. Even my brother, my mother, I brought everybody.

Did you save up to bring everyone over?

“I did. I had to save up and then I got everybody over.”

Are you still close with your relatives?

“Yes I am.”

(Went back to her faith)

“I don’t know if you chose the right person, but God is always with me. Listen, every time and every moment, every minute you have anything, just look into the sky and talk to Him, he will help you. He never fails. I don’t know if you guys believe in God, but I would appreciate if you listen to my advice. He’s the only one for us, and don’t think I’m crazy.”

What have you been doing since you retired?

“I was a religious teacher and I would prepare kids and stuff like that. I studied the whole bible. What I’ve been doing now is going to the Senior Center. We have a big table in there, and I’m the only big mouth there that will make everybody laugh.”

(Conversation ensued)

“My life wasn’t easy but I didn’t let anything bother me. Don’t let anything bother you. Anything that is not good, just throw it in your bag and keep going. You don’t know what this lady went through and this is the best country in the world.”

“I’m happy. I’m not complaining about anything. All I care about it God, peace in the world, and love.”

What made you come to New Britain?

When I came. I lived in New York first. I came straight to New York. My father-in-law was the first one to come in. He brought us. I lived in New York for 3-4 years. Then my father-in-law and mother-in-law moved to New Britain and I followed them here.

Is that where you met your husband?

“No I met him in Cuba.”

What was it like living here at that time?

“It was beautiful. You could live with the doors open. It’s not like now. Walking from here to the parking lot to senior center, I’m scared. That’s the way it is. But I got used to it I’m tough. I have a temper.”

How was it managing your kids and working at the same time?

“My husband was working in the daytime and I was working nighttime so I was taking care then, taking them to school, and work would start at 3:30. My husband would come in at that time.”

Was it hard for you to balance that kind of schedule?

“No not really I got used to it. We were not having McDonald’s and Dunkin Donuts and stuff like that. Every mother was cooking dinners. It was not like now you know? I would always make dinner and the clothes were washed. That was the way we were living. Nothing was bothering us in those years. I was fine. It’s all different now, everything is too easy.”