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An Exclusive Interview by Carmen Alicia Murguía

"I'm a Nuyorican through and through -- you can't get me out of New York City!" This is EXACTLY how Sonia Manzano began our conversation last Saturday night walking through the crowd at Blu set atop The Pfister Hotel where it was a bustle of conversation and high energy just after I greeted her, "Hello, Sonia, It's an honor to meet you! I hope your trip was a good one--where did you arrive from?" And from there on in our exclusive conversation seated in the lounge looking all beautiful, Puerto Rican, and toned in a Black evening number with her mulatta skin glistening at sundown, she kept it real.

she describes) public schools in the inner city, had individual public school teachers who really looked out for her, and went so far as to going to Sonia's house to talk with her parents about auditioning for the high school for performing arts. Before then was a teacher named Shirley Pellman who took her to go see West Side Story. It was there that she was able to see that "I could have the arts in my life" as she so eloquently phrased it.

Sonia received a scholarship to attend the prestigious Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh through her junior year. After that year, she went to New York to star in the original production of the off-Broadway show, "Godspell."

And just like that, within a year her



"The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano," a fictional book "based on own life growing up during a fiery, unforgettable time in America, when young Latinos took control of their own destinies," a beloved Christmas Eve story Urban Style, "Miracle on 133rd Street," and her latest memoir "Becoming Maria: Love and Chaos in the South Bronx." Becoming Maria was selected as the 2015 New York Times Notable Children's Books and Kirkus Best Teen Books of 2015. "Becoming Maria" is set in her 1950's childhood growing up amidst the squalor of a turbulent life, a girl's resilience as she glues herself to the TV illuminating the possibilities ahead, combined with an alcoholic father and a colorful neighborhood, Becoming Maria is a prelude to her life as MARIA on Sesame Street.

Sonia's mantra she has lived by is "Embrace your childhood and use it to succeed, because as she tells it, "When I saw myself getting the part of Maria on Sesame Street, I never forgot 'myself' en El Barrio del Bronx watching television and wondering how come nobody looks like me? So when I got on the show I said, "I'm being that person that the Lower East Side is thinking "Donde estoy?"



Before she stood up from our interview, she said, "I'll be happy to report to to New York that there are a lot of Latin's in Milwaukee!" and thanks me with a Latin kiss on the cheek and

a good laugh between us.

Sonia Manzano's journey as a proud Nuyorican del Barrio en El Bronx shows us just as far as you can go surrounded by people who care and encourage you, that being YOU

is vital so take YOU wherever you go, and most importantly, that there will ALWAYS be a little girl, boy or adult preguntando, "Donde Estoy?" and you can show them: "Aqui mami or papi, aqui estas..."

5 Questions With Sonia Manzano

1. The Bronx have produced some amazing women including honorable judge Sonia Sotomayor, Jenny from the Block and You... what is it about the Bronx, NY that manifests such beauty such passion and such talent?

Good question. The Bronx also claims the Bret salsero Willie Colon and Carlos Henriquez (part of New York's, Lincoln Center's musical lineup.) There is a special attitude that Bronx-ties have. My grandmother lived in El Barrio in Manhattan and as a kid and I wished we lived there as well because it had such a strong Puerto Rican identity. I didn't think coming from the Bronx was as cool. As I got older I embraced what was around me more and more. So maybe I tried harder to define myself as a Bronx girl!

2. What was inside that little girl that kept your hope and your dream alive and your heart racing because you knew this was the life you were destined for?

My parents described life as a struggle, a "Lucha." I always felt there had to be more to life than struggling. I would see glimpses of the bigger world in museums, and movies and television. I wanted to be part of that bigger world I saw outside my house.

3. From Season 3 through Season 45 you woke up every day and said "¡Me Voy A Poner Las Botas Carajo!" The way so many Latin women do from the Island to the Bronx... what was it that kept you going?

I don't think I ever heard that expression "¡Me Voy A Poner Las Botas Carajo!" but I can say I certainly loved going to Sesame Street each and every day. Probably because they really valued my input. Unlike most organizations that hire you to follow orders, they hired me to contribute to their mission in my own way.

4. Where are your parents' families from in Puerto Rico (The pueblo and the town)? How did your fathers and your mothers proud heritage and love shape you and support you into becoming the woman you are today?

My father is from Manati and my mother from Aguas Buenas. My mother was orphaned at five years old and spent her early years almost as an indentured servant. My father had a harsh mother. Both were very poor. They lived lives so mean it's hard for me to even imagine. Still they loved Puerto Rico. And they shared that affection of the island with me through their appreciation of music, Bombas y Plenas from the island. It made me love the culture as well.

5. We often talk about being a little girl being teenagers adulthood and AARP. We rarely read, see, think or talk about those preteen years what would you like to see to pre-teen Latinas reading this?

It was a real man's world when I was growing up! Woman had to attach themselves to a man. Or throw their lot in with a man. Nothing wrong with that, but I always wanted it to be my choice. And I always wanted to think what I wanted to think, and see how far I could go on my own. Society is now more open to woman forging their own paths. I encourage young girls to take advantage of that!

Finally, I thank you; my mother thanks you, my friends and their mothers thank you for helping to shape us, keep us laughing, keep us singing, keep us enjoying words and being children and being proud to be dark skinned and Latina and female and smart all at once!

Affectionately & Proudly,
Carmen Alicia Murguía, Journalist, Author, Educator.



The Award-winning Actor, Author of 5 Books, Emmy-winning Television Script Writer, and renowned Speaker was invited to speak last Saturday in Milwaukee for the Annual Hispanic Professionals of Greater Milwaukee (HPGM) Black Tie Gala "Investing in Hispanic Education, Youth, the Future of America and our Communities" in the grand ballroom--ballrooms I add because it was a sold out diverse crowd who came together to hear Sesame Street's very own "MARIA!"

"The more I learned about the Hispanic Professionals of Greater Milwaukee the more thrilled I am to be in Milwaukee. The way that HPGM raises funds for higher education now more than ever, because I think it's terribly important now in today's political atmosphere there seems to be a disdain for intellectualism, and education which is strange," Sonia expressed. I'm happy to learn that Hispanic Professionals are lending a hand to those who need it for scholarships.

Sonia, who went to substandard (as

dream come true unfolded before her eyes, and Sonia's life changed. And so did millions of children and parents as she was offered the opportunity to play "MARIA" on Sesame Street from the early 1970's until her retirement from the show in 2015. "A BIG YES!" is what the people at Sesame Street said when I joined them as a cast member. She continued, "They asked me what did I know of underserved children and to tell them a good way of of telling our story from the perspective of poor, Puerto Rican kids from El Barrio. And at first I was very nervous, but I got through it and pretty soon we were teaching each other Spanglish words that Puerto Rican kids would say and how do Mexican-American children say the same thing, and eventually I began writing scripts for the Sesame Street series.

Sonia is the author of five acclaimed books, "No Dogs Allowed!" her first picturebook, which turned into a children's musical, "A Box Full of Kittens" which centers around Ruthie who wants to be a Superhero,