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Interview with

Peggy Santos

Conducted by Lillian Johnson

Month (?) 16, 1990

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LILLIAN JOHNSON: -- 16, 1990, at the 69th NLADA conference.

Hello, Peggy. How are you?

PEGGY SANTOS: Oh, I'm just fine. And you?

JOHNSON: I'm fine.

This is a wonderful opportunity to include the history of a wonderful lady in the legal services movement. And my goal here today is to help you share that with the rest of the world.

SANTOS: Well, thank you very much.

JOHNSON: I'm Lillian Johnson. And I'm going to start the particular aspect of the oral history that you include by asking you to share with us how you became involved in Legal Services.

SANTOS: My involvement with Legal Services came because as a parent of a large family -- I have 11 children -- I always had housing problems. Because we were a large family, I had problems with my landlords, with code violations.

And I found myself always running into court, going to legal aid at that time, getting a lawyer to help us through a myriad of problems, from harassment, to shutting off my water, to cutting my phone lines. So I have been involved with Legal Services for a long time.

In fact, because one of my dwellings was so bad with the rain in it, raining in, the roof was leaking, the furnace was not fixed properly, that my husband and I had to take my family, split it up. Some of them stayed with my mother-in-law, and some of them stayed with me for about three months.

We finally went into court, and we had the first rent withholding case in Massachusetts. So I'm very grateful to Legal Services for being there. And that's my first involvement. That was back in the '60s.

JOHNSON: Do you have anything that could help you to identify the year for us?

SANTOS: I'm almost sure it was '66 or '67.

JOHNSON: And it was Boston? You lived in Dorchester then?

SANTOS: I lived in Dorchester then at that time when we had the first rent withholding case.

JOHNSON: So you went to the local Legal Services office, presented your fact situation, were assigned an attorney?

SANTOS: How it happened, I went to -- it was the American Friends Association and through working with them. They were involved with the legal aid, the lawyers at that time, and that's how I got involved.

I was working with the Quaker movement at that

time, who was using the legal aid lawyers. And that's how it all became involved.

JOHNSON: So now, after your experience in having your own case essentially handled, the skill of the lawyer or the concern, the interest of the lawyer was so great, that you thought that it would be helpful if you also got to know what else was available and be able to share it with your community or what?

SANTOS: That's exactly it because as a -- my focus(?), there's a lot of stereotyping that goes on in a community. There's a lot of stereotyping that goes on with families, large families.

And I think my anger and my frustration, when I'd even say how large my family was would cause problems. Well, they would expect -- they had low expectations of us, not only in housing, but also in schools. I had problems in schools about what they expected from families, children that comes from large families.

And I was interested in all the school problems, the school problems in Boston that came with equal schools. That meant that schools being the same, having the same curriculum as other schools. Right in the city of Boston, some schools would have gym and other schools would not.

And the attitudes of the teachers towards the children that they were teaching, that too was some of the things that I got interested in.

JOHNSON: I'm trying to also help you to share with us who those lawyers were because what we're trying to capture, to the extent possible, is names and dates and, you know, groups of people who ultimately impacted the shape of Legal Services.

Do you recall the names of the lawyers that you first --

SANTOS: Names of the lawyers, I can't readily recall, but I know some of the teachers. Some of the names that were around was Alan Rogers. He's still around now. Gary Bellows was some of those lawyers on the first line. I just can't remember all of them.

JOHNSON: And so did you become a part of an organization or a group that ultimately had as your lawyer Alan Rogers and Gary Bellows? Is that --

SANTOS: I became part of a tenants association, a public housing tenant association. We had, as part of our lawyers -- it wasn't Gary Bellows.

Click it off.

(Pause)

SANTOS: The next time that I really got involved with the

Legal Service lawyers was when I moved into public housing, and during that time, that was in nineteen sixty -- '68 and '69. I moved in in 1968.

The public housing was beginning to deteriorate. And if you go to the management and ask them for repairs, the repairs were slow. Sometimes you did not get the repairs. The attitude was that you've got decent housing. What more do you want?

It was as if the people that lived in public housing shouldn't want anything more, that they weren't deserving of anything more.

So in the meantime, we found that we could not do it going one by one, so we banded together to fight for sanitary conditions. Have them clean up the garbage. If the incinerators were broken, to fix them. There were times when the trash was not pulled out of the incinerators, and we had incinerators on each floor, and the garbage would spill all out onto the hallway floors.

And we were expected to clean up that garbage, keep our housing clean. And we were responsible for the rodents and the roach infestation that eventually occurred.

And it was through the lawyers that talked to the

community, come to the community meetings and said that we would have to do something. They could not do it for us. They could guide us and tell us our rights. And what we wanted to do after that, it would be up to us.

I don't think they actually advocated. I can't go along with the theory that they go out there and look for issues to, you know, sue the city or that kind. They just make people understand that as human beings, regardless of where you live, what your income is, how many's in your family, that you have rights. And it helps to build your self-esteem. And I think that's exactly what they did.

And that's how our organization moved. And our tenants organization -- I lived in Franklin Field. And our tenant organization was very, very active at one time.

But beyond my particular tenant organization, the tenant -- Boston housing tenant organizations combined was very, very active. We had a tenant policy council, which also used the Legal Services lawyers to help us incorporate that tenant policy council.

Their job was to be the liaison between all of the tenants of Boston public housing and the public housing

authority. And through doing their good work of training the tenants about their rights, with the help of the lawyers of showing us how to organize and incorporate individual local tenant associations, we became quite powerful.

So powerful to the fact that we had the Boston Housing Authority, one of the biggest housing authorities in America, put into receivership. And there was a master appointed. And as of this day, 1990, I'm almost sure they're not back to the board the way -- the board system, what they had before.

And they are very accountable. They're not 100 percent ready yet, but they've done a lot of things much better.

And the Perez case is reviewed each and every year by a judge to see if the Boston Housing Authority is ready to take responsibility for it.

We've moved back from the master enough to put it back into the hands of the mayor. That's where we are now.

And that was all done because there were lawyers to tell us, yes, we do have rights. We knew it, some of us knew it, but we had to have that legal voice to speak to their legal voice and say, "Yes, they are.

Yes, they do have rights."

And just the whole idea of us becoming a powerful -- you have to get out there, make sure that everybody know what you know. You know, you have to do it in order to make the movement move.

Now, one or two people knowing something and doing something is not quite as important as lots more knowing and doing.

And that way, you sort of save the manpower hours of the lawyers, save some of their energy for when you come for the big thrust. And I think that's how we've handled it mostly in Massachusetts.

And public housing is really my main thing. And then I have gone on to healthcare. I guess as I get older and my children get older, my interests change. I don't get away from the other things. I'm not away from the school problem, but that's not a main thrust for me. It's healthcare for the elderly, my public housing and healthcare for -- that's one of the main things I'm interested in.

And in order to have that, we need equal access to justice, so we need the Legal Services around.

JOHNSON: Does that mean that you don't have children in school anymore?

SANTOS: That means that I don't have -- my children are not in school. I have my grandchildren and all of the grandchildren in my community that has adopted me. They're in school.

So it's still an interest to me, but it's not a top priority because my children are strong, you know, like I am strong. We've made one another strong as a family. So they're doing and pursuing the things as necessary to try to keep the schools fair.

JOHNSON: So you feel as though the experience of having the lawyers come to the community, provide you with information and indicating to you that there are some things that they can do and then there are some things that one must do for oneself and your feeling very comfortable in that role is how you began to develop even more initiatives as a client. And each time becoming more and more engrossed in the Legal Services movement.

Did you ever serve on the board of directors of the local Legal Services program?

SANTOS: I served as representative of my tenant organization, TPC, on Mass. Law Reform's board, and that's how I got officially involved with the Legal Services clients councils.

Before then, I was not officially involved with them. I was in my local tenant policy councils and not the local Legal Services councils.

And you have to understand, in Massachusetts, it's a little bit different. Most of our client councils are there, not just the Legal Services clients. It's clients. Some belong to MLAC. Some belong to other housing innovations. But we all have used the legal services as a means of empowering us so that we can empower the people that we represent.

JOHNSON: So what's -- MLAC, did you say? What does that stand for?

SANTOS: Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation. That's the organization that funnels the money from IOLTA into the Legal Services program. It is not funded by LSC.

JOHNSON: Oh, at all?

SANTOS: No.

JOHNSON: I see.

And so what's different in terms of the east, at least, from your perspective is that there are actually client groups that originated from their own common interest in the struggle.

SANTOS: Mm-hmm. And a lot of them, a lot of the movers in those groups are left over from the old civil rights

movement.

By Boston being north, does that mean that we do not have those civil rights issues such as segregation? If anybody can remember our school problems and housing and just geographical areas where blacks are treated differently just because you're there. You are subject to police stop and questioning and sometime arrest just because you're there.

So we have still been moving along the civil rights movement.

JOHNSON: And then once you began to work on the board of directors of your local Legal Services program, you then became acquainted with the National Alliance Council?

SANTOS: After being on Mass. Law Reform Institute, that's the board that I serve on, I became involved with the Massachusetts Legal Services Client Council.

And then on a regional basis, I began -- became involved, and we would have our annual meetings. I learned more about what the regions were doing and what we could all do better on the national movement.

At that time, I had met Bernie Veney at one of our national clients regional meetings in Boston. At that time, we had elections, and I was sent by my region to

be a member of the PAG steering committee. And from there, my interest grew.

After the defunding of MCC or when they were putting MCC through a lot of problems, we realized that on PAG, we had to continue the struggle because the voice was needed. The activity was needed. The exchange of information was very, very necessary.

So it just grew and it grew.

JOHNSON: Well, now let's go back to your national client council days. You were elected or appointed by your board to the national clients -- the regional national clients council or to the national clients council? You were a part of the national clients council structure?

SANTOS: Yes. I'll explain.

JOHNSON: Okay.

SANTOS: The tenant policy council, which is the housing council, elected me to represent them on the Mass. Law Reform board. That's a support center. It has -- its board members are from other groups, from other client groups. That's where it gets its client representation.

While a member of the Mass. Law Reform board, I then became involved with the client council, the

Massachusetts clients council, which was a part of the regional NCC structure, which was a part of the overall NCC structure. And through my involvement with Mass. clients council, regional clients council, I was elected to the PAG steering committee.

The board of Mass. Law Reform didn't appoint me to anything. It was just the fact that I was a client and that I became involved with the Mass. clients council.

JOHNSON: If you had to characterize the change in client involvement over the course of the past 15 years, how would you do that? What words would you use?

SANTOS: The words that I would use to characterize client involvement over the past 15 years was effective, frustrating and effective again.

JOHNSON: Explain that.

SANTOS: Well, during the years when NCC was active and carrying out the roles it was supposed to, clients' voices were heard. Clients' movement was very effective. They were very effective on their boards because of the training that they received and the technical assistance they received from NCC.

Clients were innovative, and they moved and had other programs outside of depending on Legal Services programs for their funding and other things that they

did.

Then during the survival times when the Legal Services programs were under attack and they were trying to survive so that they would be there for those that needed them, the clients' voices on the boards were not heard as loudly because the program was so busy trying to survive for the masses.

So during that time, the clients' movement almost stopped. Well, it became dysfunctional. It was not effective. It got to the point that when we came together at NLADA meetings or any other time that clients would get together, we would be so busy discussing who knew what rather than understanding that none of us knew anything, that we'd become dysfunctional and arguing about one another instead of the issues of getting ourselves together and getting out there and restructuring and getting our voices heard and getting a unified voice heard out there, the fact that we do need that training. And since it has been taken away from us, that we're not able to get together to educate one another and exchange information and keep one another informed.

And that's what we need, but we've gone beyond that now. We can meet. We can discuss differences.

We can even yell at one another, and it doesn't have the same devastating effect that it had before because in our yelling and our screaming, we're still moving forward. It's not standing still. We're moving forward, gathering information, empowering one another and moved on to where we are now.

We have formed a national organization of clients advocates which have an interim board, which has some incorporators that were put into power by acclamation of all of the clients that was at this conference. And that is a movement forward, a movement of empowerment and a movement of effectiveness.

And I think that's where we are now. We're back on the road to effectiveness. And it feels good.

JOHNSON: Well, it certainly looks good from this side. I can tell you that the feeling in the conference is one of quiet confidence among those participants who are clients. And I appreciate it as a Legal Services person. And I know that you had a major role in that. And I'm glad. I'm glad to know you.

Tell me, and I'm sure that you get asked this question, perhaps more than you would like to, but I'd like to know if there are particular individuals in your life who you consider a hero or a heroine, and if

so, who would that be?

SANTOS: I think my parents. Especially my father had always told me that I could do anything anyone else could do. Those are the most important hero and heroines.

And I've looked out at very strong women in my family. My grandmother was a member of the Eastern Star, and she always did things.

The black women in movements and struggles, all of them were also my heroines, but in particular, I have one woman that is my mentor in Boston. And she helped me a lot.

Turn it off.

(Pause)

SANTOS: I have one woman in Massachusetts. Her name is Myra McAdoo. She was for the tenants -- she was our executive director of the tenant policy council.

And sometimes she would be going it alone against the public housing board because some of the tenants didn't want to go with her. It was all our problems, but they were afraid of being put out.

And she would tell them, "If you never stand up for yourself, you can always expect someone else to stand up for you."

And she was wonderful. And she's still my mentor. When I get into a lot of problems and I feel as though I am being challenged a lot, I will ask her, "Why? Why don't they understand?"

And she said, "That's the way it is. Just give them time. Let them vent their frustration. And then you'll find that you'll have more support."

And that's what I try to do. And she's been very helpful to me.

JOHNSON: Well, you do it very effectively, and touché to your mentor because she's very effective in helping you to appreciate what's the next step.

If you had to predict or project -- this is 1990. Where would you like to see the client movement in 1995?

SANTOS: 1995, I'd like to see the client movement in complete partnership with any of the Legal Services organizations. By partnership, I would like to see them with independent funding, able to do the kind of training, able to do the kind of research and the technical assistance for client groups that other organizations do, like PAG does, like NLADA does, like any of the support centers do for the programs. I'd like to be able to have that kind of assistance for

clients anywhere under any situations.

If we couldn't do it all, we'd be able to plug in to some resource that could do it. I'd like to see clients with a clearinghouse of issues, how clients can get things done, you know.

And I think we can get there.

JOHNSON: Well, with effective leaders like yourself, I'm sure we can get there too.

Is there anything else that you think may be helpful to share with posterity?

SANTOS: I think that the client movement, the clients are on the move. And I think that we have to trust one another more and know that it's going to happen.

That's it.

JOHNSON: Thank you.

(Conclusion of interview)

