

Edwin Meléndez's Remarks For the inauguration of the Labor exhibit

October 27, 2011

Saludos and welcome to Labor! We are honored that the Centro Archives collections serve as the source of the inspiration for this ground breaking exhibition. The Centro Library and Archives have been serving the faculty and students of Hunter College and CUNY, as well as the Puerto Rican community, for almost 40 years. Now we are in a new home, in East Harlem, El Barrio, the neighborhood that historically was and continuous to be at the center of Puerto Rican life and culture in the United States.

“Labor” is the first in what will be a series of public exhibitions at the Hunter College East Harlem gallery. The exhibit focuses on the labor experiences of early Puerto Rican migrants to the mainland and the ways in which they integrated themselves into society. The artists’ work included in this exhibit, were inspired by the materials in our archives. They used our collection of photographs, primary sources, as well as our extensive records from the Office of the Government of Puerto Rico in the United States and from the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund. The artists have sought to depict the story of the men and women who came to New York seeking a better life for themselves and their families during the migration period of the 40’s and 50’s, known as the “great migration.”

Indeed, the ‘40s and ‘50s was a critical migratory era for Puerto Ricans who came to the U.S. in pursuit of the American Dream. Many of the Puerto Ricans during the era returned to the island as reflected in the lyrics of the popular song En Mi Viejo San Juan. Others however stayed and became part of the metropolitan mix of people that we have come to know as New York City, paving the way for the stateside Puerto Ricans communities of today.

Centro would like to express our deepest gratitude to all of those involved in our move to El Barrio and the celebration of our new home with “Labor,” such a unique tribute to the Puerto Rican heritage and to the historic preservation efforts of our organization. First and foremost, we would like to thank President Raab and the Hunter College community for choosing Centro Archives collections as the inspiration for the project. We would also like to thank Susana Leval and Antonio Martorrel, for their dedicated work serving as curators and advisor to this talented group of artists.

We would also like to thank the group of gifted artists involved in the creation of the exhibit To Melissa Calderon, Miguel Luciano, Juan Sanchez, and Nitza Tufiño, long-time friends of Centro, and renowned Puerto Rican Artist Antonio Martorell, whose leadership and vision in the

development of this exhibit was exceptional. You are brilliant and talented artists and your exhibit will speak for itself to all those who visit. And, we would like to thank HITN and its leadership for taking the initiative of creating a documentary of the making of the exhibit to broadly share this experience. We say thank you, especially to Jose Luis Rodriguez, President of HITN, Linda Hernandez, Chief Operating Officer, and producers Gamaliel Ramos and Sofia Gallizá.

Finally, we would like to extend a sincere thank you to the community of East Harlem; we are overwhelmingly delighted to now be a part of your neighborhood. With your help, Centro will continue to be the main source for providing information on the Puerto Rican community in the United States to students, professors, researchers and the community. We will continue to work tirelessly to reinforce cultural identity and instill cultural pride. In this spirit, we look forward to our many partnerships and collaborations in the near future!

Edwin Meléndez