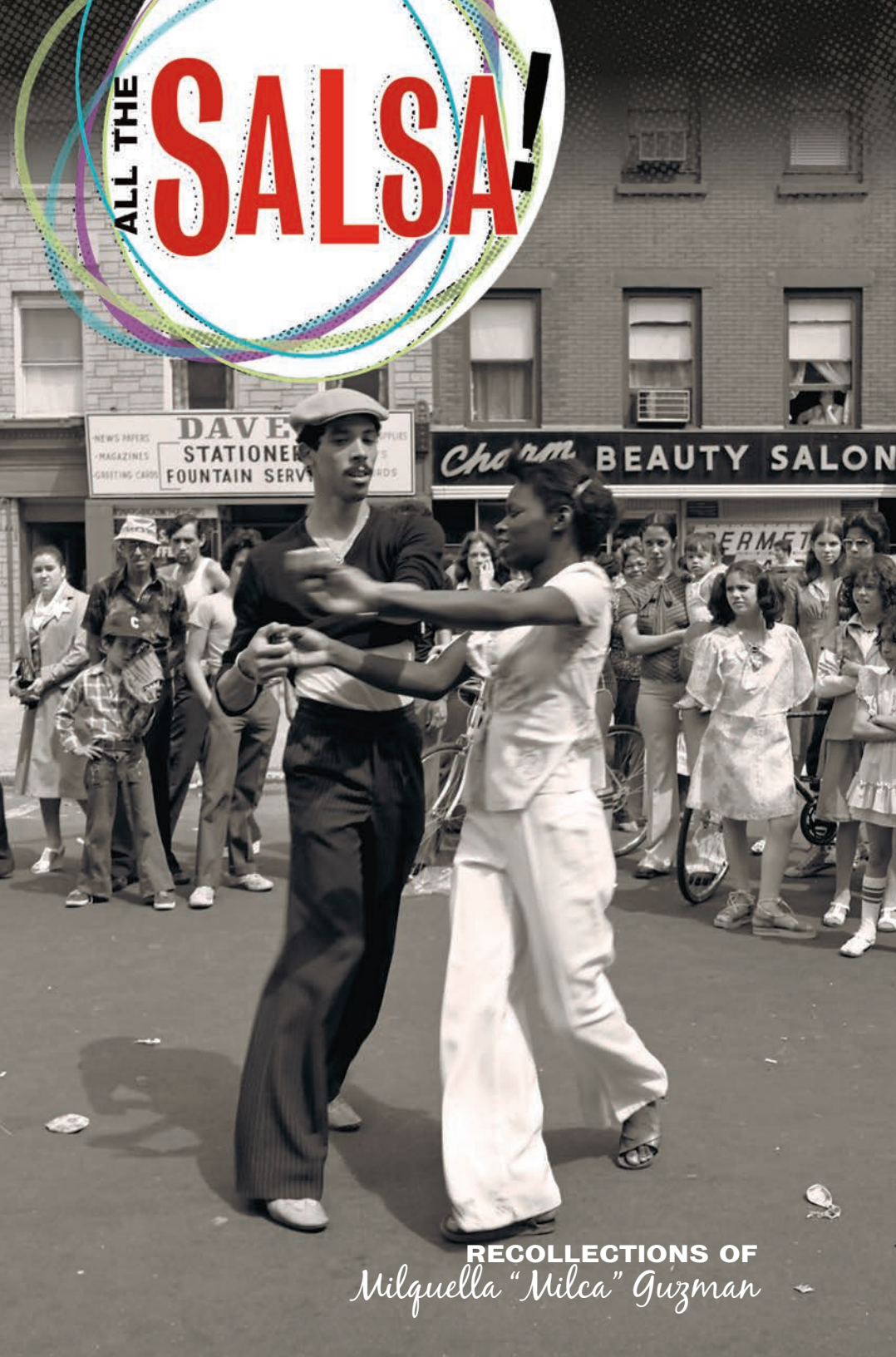


# ALL THE SALSA!



RECOLLECTIONS OF  
*Milquella "Milca" Guzman*



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## Vanishing Hoboken

*The Hoboken Oral History Project*

A Project of the Hoboken Historical Museum and  
the Hoboken Public Library

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Cover photograph of dancers on Washington Street  
by John F. Conn, circa 1976.

*'Cause I remember up to  
the eighties, we were . . .  
Hoboken was like,  
you were walking on the street,  
you would see the speakers  
in the windows. All the salsa!  
There were a lot of Spanish people,  
and they would put out the  
music, music, music.*

—Milquella “Milca” Guzman,  
August 23, 2021



## Introduction

Stand on any Hoboken street with Milquella Guzman—known to all as Milca—and you will inevitably watch her interact with kids passing by. And not only kids, but the parents of those kids, and maybe *their* parents. This is because Milca has worked security for decades in Hoboken schools, greeting kindergartners to high schoolers, checking their hall passes (and checking on visitors), guiding them through meltdowns and challenging misbehavior, and most of all, she avows, respecting them. Her energy and love and compassion are easy to discern by students and parents, and hard to forget, even years after graduation. And Milca, too, does not forget “her kids,” no matter their age.

Milca was born in the Dominican Republic and moved to Hoboken with her mother and sisters in 1970, after many years in Jamaica Plain, in the Boston area. But before they moved, she was already visiting her aunt in Hoboken, in the summers, and knew she wanted to live here, “because there was a lot of Spanish people.” Hoboken’s large Spanish-speaking population included families from Cuba and the Dominican Republic, but mostly its roots were in Puerto Rico. From 1945 to 1975, thousands of Puerto Rican families migrated to Hoboken, where jobs often awaited them in the

**OPPOSITE:** *Milquella Guzman wearing her Hoboken Board of Education Security uniform and holding a photo of one of her grandchildren, Johnathan Aviles, at his high school graduation.*

Tootsie Roll factory and in then-prevalent garment factories. The city's ethnic character was dramatically transformed by the new arrivals: by 1970, approximately one-quarter of Hoboken's population, 10,000 people, were either born in Puerto Rico or first-generation mainland born.

Milca's recollections offer a window into that time, one of joy and stability—when men gathered on sidewalks to play dominos, when salsa music filled the air, when factory jobs provided a steady income, and when people danced in the streets during community celebrations—and one of fear and sorrow, when acts of arson terrorized tenants in the rapidly gentrifying city. Through it all Milca drew upon the strength and lessons provided by her mother, Maria, which she has passed along to her sons, Alejandro “Alex” Guzman, a real estate professional, and Johnny Aviles, an engineer for the Port Authority, and, more recently, to her five grandchildren—Johnathan, Asia, Ava, Amania, and Malyah.

Milca Guzman was interviewed on August 23, 2021, by Robert Foster and Holly Metz at the Hoboken Historical Museum. Copies of the transcripts from which this chapbook was derived have been deposited in the Historical Collection of the Hoboken Public Library and in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

## Moving to **HOBOKEN**

I was born in Santo Domingo, [in the Dominican Republic], February 24, 1956. I come to this country April 24, 1960, to Boston, Massachusetts. I was four years old. [How do I remember the exact date? From when] I got my green card. Now I'm a U.S. citizen.

I was there [in the Boston area] until 1973, 1972. I was in Jamaica Plain. And yes, it was cold. You're telling me! It was *really* cold. The socks—*everything*—double! [What I remember most] is the train on top, above the street, [an elevated train].

Then, in 1972, my aunt was living in Hoboken, [on Eleventh Street and Willow Avenue], and my *mami* said to me, “Stay with her for a couple of months.” It was summer. Her husband starting working nights, she needed to be with someone else. We were a close family—and we are, still.

I liked it in Hoboken and I tell my aunt to convince [my mother to move here]. And then she did. We moved to 12th Street and Willow. She came with my two younger sisters. I'm the older one.

**OVERLEAF:** *Swimming off the 14th Street pier, photo by Peter and Jack Mecca, circa 1975. Milca remembers, “We don't know how to go to the beach. That was my beach, right there.”*





The owner [of the building] was Mohica [who later had a popular taxi stand] though at that time he didn't have no taxi. Tommy [Olivieri, a Puerto Rican tenants' rights activist] lived across the street.

I always live over here—[uptown]—all the years. The farthest I go [downtown] is Ninth Street, Ninth and Garden.

[Why did I want my family to move to Hoboken?] Because there was a lot of Spanish people. There were Italian and Puerto Rican [people here in the 1970s]. Boston was different. The area where we were there were not too many people [like us]. I tell my aunt, I want to stay here!

**ABOVE:** Men playing dominoes on Willow Avenue, including tenant activist Tom Olivieri (far right). Photo by Carol Halebien, circa 1978.

## MUSIC IN THE PARK— and the Clubs, and the Streets

Columbus Park, that was a park where we would hang out. We were young. We were always in the park, and they were playing music. Every time, we would play music.

And on Madison, there was a band there, Frankie Ruiz of Hoboken. He was on [Third and Madison]. That area was *bad*. Bad, bad, bad [at the time. But] he played music and sang over there, when he was a young kid [and we went to hear him]. He passed away but you can read about him, everything about him, on YouTube. He started in Hoboken. This was from 1975 to the 1980s. 'Cause I remember up to the eighties we were . . . Hoboken was like, you were walking on the street, you would see the speakers in the windows. All the salsa! There were a lot of Spanish people, and they would put out the music, music, music.

There was a lot of parties. You know the guy, Cuna? We used to call him Cuna. He was [on] Garden Street. Now [that's] a garage. But back in the day, it was the place the parents bring the babies to do the baby shower. Guzman. He was Puerto Rican—not a part of my family. He was helping people, too, like Tommy Olivieri.

[CUNA—Citizens United for Action—was a social services and cultural organization, with an office on Willow Avenue. They distributed government supplies and] cheese to the people, like they're doing now in the YMCA. They would give you blankets in the winter. You tell them how many kids you've got and you get it



for the kids. And there was a guy in there, throwing parties, too. [Sometimes] they closed Willow. They have music; we were dancing in the street. There were a lot of things [to eat]: Spanish food, *pasteles*, rice and beans . . . There was like three or four parties a month. Sometimes they do it in Willow, sometimes Fourth Street. They were doing it over here, by Wallace School, too.

**ABOVE:** A baseball game in Columbus Park, photo by Peter and Jack Mecca, circa 1975. **OPPOSITE LEFT:** Milca, pregnant with her first son, Alejandro (Alex) Guzman, at her mother's apartment, 206 14th Street, April 1975. **OPPOSITE RIGHT:** Milca's cousin Ava holding Alex, 14th Street, 1975.

## HOBOKEN HIGH SCHOOL

[Before I was here in the summers.] After my aunt convinced my mother [to move here], then I go to high school. That was my first year in Hoboken High School. I was supposed to graduate in 1975. My sister was in Brandt School. And then my other baby sister was in the new Wallace School. That was in 1972, the first year they opened Wallace.

[But one day at school,] I get dizzy and they send me to the nurse. The nurse say, I'm gonna call your parents. They call my mother. They tell my mother to bring me to the doctor, to do me a check . . . maybe they tell her . . . And my mother bring me to the doctor, Gonzalez, that was on Washington Street, and they do me a check, and they say I'm going to have a baby. And my *mami* say, "What about school?" "She's going to have to stay home."





Back in the day, Hoboken people, you get pregnant, they tell you, “Bye.” They’re not [going to be] responsible if something happens to me [at school]. That was 1975.

They told me I could come back, when I got the baby, the door was open. I remember they told me. Maybe they [think] my mother was going to watch it, but they told me, “When you got the baby, if you want to go back to school, to finish . . .” But how I gonna go back?

**BELOW LEFT:** *Milca’s mother, Maria Guzman, holds baby Alex (center), with Milca’s sisters Jackie (left) and America (right) at her side, inside 206 14th Street, 1975.*

**BELOW RIGHT:** *Milca’s second son, Johnny Aviles at the Puerto Rican Day Parade, 8th Street and Willow Avenue, 1979.*



## MY MOTHER *Taught Me Everything*

I had my son, I was eighteen. But before that, we had to do everything in the house. My mother teach us to wash clothes, clean the house, everything. From her I learned sewing. She had a sewing machine and I learned how to do it. A lot of things! I learned everything—painting, whatever I have to do, I don’t need a man. I knew how to do everything. I’m telling you. [Laughs.]

My mother was working in Maxwell House. [I don’t know what she did there.] She’s just working. [My sisters and I were] in the house. My sisters clean the room, I was in the kitchen. I was cooking, because when she comes from work, everything have to be [ready and] clean.

After I had my first son, I didn’t want to go back to school. My mother was watching my baby, but I had to pay her! Ten dollars. “You pay ten dollars!” All the food and everything. But she teach me to be a woman. And to be tough. I tell you, in the beginning, I was crying. I said, she don’t love me. But now that I’m a grown woman, with two kids, I say, Ohhh. Now I know. Because I was doing the same thing with my kids. What she teach me, I did with my two boys. And they’re 46 and 44, and they’re telling *their* kids, *mami* say go to the park and in five minutes you have to be here. And if we’re not there the time she said, it’s a problem.

[My mother is] ninety-six-years-old [now]. And she’s still boiling beans, [making them from scratch]. ‘Cause she don’t like the beans in the can. And I grow up like that. I do the same thing, like her.

## GOING OUT

But when I stay with my mother, I [also] go out on weekends. . . [Laughs.] There was a discotheque, on Adams. You know the multi-center? In the back. A little bar, but you could play music. My son's father, he played the bongos. The congas. Back in the day, he was playing with "El Canario." Jose Alberto "El Canario." Salsa. Johnny Pacheco, all these people, but Jose, it was a new band. And my husband was the *bongoceros*.

There was another club, Serpico Lounge. [And on 14th street, at the corner of Willow] there was a club. That was owned by a lady named Mini. She [would] bring bands. And I would bring my son to the club. She had like a little office, and I put the carriage there. And we [would be] dancing and everything. My mother get mad. She say, "Wait a minute." [First] she helped me to go to welfare, to get me an apartment. Do this, this, this, this. She say, "I'm going back to Boston. You think I'm your babysitter, and I'm not your babysitter." She leave when my son was eight months [and my younger sisters moved with her, too].

## FACTORY Work

I leave Terry Girl [after] one year of work, when I was nineteen, [and I start] working with the family Dell'Aquila. Dell'Aquila have factories everywhere. They have one in Seventh Street, one in Fifth, and the one over here, in the Tea Building, on the third floor.



We don't get in the building the way you do now; we had to go through a door on the side. And then go up to the third floor. That was a pajama factory. And from there, I went to work in the one on Seventh Street. That was like 1985. Then the factory get burned.

[After that,] I'm working with the box factory, 1000 Clinton, and a little factory, 49 Harrison. The boss was Jewish, he come from New York. One block from Observer Highway. The material [we were working with] looked like a crochet. You put it on a special machine that was to design and cut it. This was to make a kind of skirt for the window. I worked there . . . [until] he passed away, and they closed the factory. That was in 1996.

**ABOVE LEFT:** Milca holding Alex on the fire escape of 206 14th Street, 1975. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Milca's best friend Juan holding Alex on a bench in Columbus Park, 1975.

## THE THREAT OF FIRES: *We All Get Together*

When I came here to visit, [I came to] Eleventh Street, [where my aunt lived]. You see where the garage is [now], it's empty. There was a big fire. My aunt was living there. They put gasoline everywhere. I don't know, they said it was a man, jealous. [He] was in love with a woman and she said she didn't want to be with him, and he burned the building. [A] *mami* passed [a child] from one window to the other. She told her daughter to do it [too]. She did it, but she fall. Because the mother started losing her way. That was Eleventh and Willow. Right on the corner.

I remember that one. Oh my god. Because my aunt was still living there. That night, I was not in that building. We come out from 12th Street, we're looking for her, we're looking for her. And thank God she went back to the fire escape. The door was locked—people were not thinking—in like an hour, everybody think about everything. They were locking the door, they never thought they were going to have an emergency. I was kicking, kicking the door. Now everybody watches; you have to [have it] clear, just in case. Thank God that guy, the one guy with my aunt, [was] keeping everyone [safe]. After he opened the door, when my mother see her sister, they bring her to the hospital, because she [had inhaled] a little smoke. She was okay. But that was bad, bad, bad.

The fires were terrible. [There were a lot of them. People were worried about being burned out or dying in a fire.] They did that to the Hernandez family. That was on Twelfth and Washington. That building. They put the gasoline in the hall and the fire escape. There was a

Spanish lady, with all the brothers and sisters, they all passed away. They were little kids. They were in Wallace School. You go to Wallace School, they had the memorial there. The Hernandez family.

When my mother leave to Boston, I moved to 1312 Bloomfield, on the second floor. And me and my husband went to New York to a movie, to see *Grease*. On 42nd Street. We're scared [to stay] in the house. We started to get ready, to go to sleep. And I said, "Junio, shut the light". He said, "What light?" "The living room light." It was not [the light]. It was the door—all fire. He said, "Milca, get the baby." I got the baby. And I said, "What happened?" I had to go like this [*dips head*] because of the door. Go to the fire escape. And there was more people over there. They helped me and my husband.

We [all] get together: You sleep in the day, and we sleep in the night. And we watching that building. Because that's what they were doing—they were trying to [make us leave]. They were trying to burn us over there.

That was the house next to where the Biancamano family lives, the guys with the store that sells mozzarella [on Washington Street]. They were living there for a long time. The wife gave me—you remember the Italian carriage with the *big wheels*?—[she gave me] one like this for my son in 1975. They were living there. The house next to that, that was where I live. There was a lot of Spanish people living in there. I was pregnant with my second son.

**OVERLEAF:** *Flyer produced by citizens groups, including CUNA and Por la Gente (For the People), protesting arson deaths in Hoboken, 1981.*

**Sábado, 14 de Nov.**

## **Marcha Contra Incendios Criminales**

**Lugar de reunión: 12 pm Washington y la calle 12**

(Lugar del último incendio)

**Concentración, 2 p.m., Edificio Municipal**

**¡Alto a los incendios criminales y a las evicciones!**  
**¡Alto a la guerra contra los pobres!**

13 víctimas Latinas y Negras, casi todos niños han muerto a causa de incendios deliberados en las últimas dos semanas. Por lo menos 50 familias fueron obligadas a mudarse este año a causa de incendios y los inquilinos hablan de amenazas hechas por los propietarios para lograr su evicción de cualquier forma.

Han aumentado las evicciones, el hostigamiento, y los desplazamientos desde que se aprobó el 15 de julio la ley que elimina el control de las rentas en alquileres vacíos. Un sin número de familias de clase obrera con ingresos moderados enfrentan la mudanza obligatoria para así abrir paso a los ricos.

**El Concilio de la Ciudad y el Alcalde Capiello son responsables por las muertes de las víctimas de los incendios—porque ellos aprobaron la ley que terminó con el control de rentas otorgando a los propietarios un incentivo monetario para echar a los inquilinos.**

Leyes como estas que debilitan el control de rentas en el estado de Nueva Jersey son el resultado de las políticas de la administración de Reagan que ha lanzado la guerra contra los pobres. Los políticos de Hoboken, tanto Demócratas como Republicanos, se han unido a los intereses de los propietarios, negocios de bienes y raíces, bancos y al alto comercio, contra los intereses de los pobres y el pueblo trabajador. Los resultados son mudanzas, suspensiones en los empleos, recortes y reajustes en los cupones para alimentos, asistencia pública, atención médica, transporte público, viviendas y la educación.

Mientras se aprueban leyes que favorecen y aumentan las ganancias de los ricos como la eliminación del control de las rentas en Hoboken, sin embargo, las leyes que supuestamente protegen los derechos de los inquilinos, protección contra incendios y el hostigamiento, no se imponen.

**¡Políticos Demandan Recortes—El Pueblo Demanda Resistencia!**

El 15 de julio cientos de residentes de Hoboken se congregaron en el Concilio de la Ciudad para protestar las leyes que dieron fin al control de las rentas. En todo el país, en pueblos y ciudades, los residentes han iniciado un movimiento de resistencia contra los efectos del programa federal de favorecer a los ricos e impulsar recortes, racismo y la entrega de millones de dólares al ya extenso presupuesto del Pentágono.

Tenemos que organizar un movimiento de resistencia aquí en Hoboken. Las grandes posibilidades y logros que un movimiento de resistencia puede alcanzar se dejaron ver el Día de Solidaridad, 19 de Septiembre, en Washington, D.C. cuando 500,000 obreros y organizaciones comunales marcharon contra el Reaganismo.

- Alto a los incendios criminales.
- Revocación de las leyes que terminaron con el control de rentas.
- Carcel y procesamiento a los que violan leyes de registro de rentas y detector de incendios.
- Viviendas para los inquilinos forzados a mudarse.
- Establecer una oficina independiente de asuntos de viviendas e inquilinos para proteger los derechos de estos.

Iniciado por: Ciudadanos Unidos Pro Nueva Acción (CUNA), El Congreso del Pueblo de Nueva Jersey (APC), Otros endorsantes: Emergency Coalition to Save Rent Control in Hoboken, Hoboken Union of Tenants (HUT), Ana Mercado Organización de Rentantes (AMOR), Por la Gente/For the People

Para más información llame: 653-1770, 433-2332

Obra de mano donada

¿Serán sus niños las próximas víctimas?



El pueblo de Hoboken a su vez no se cruzará de brazos permitiendo que nuestros hijos sean incendiados y que nuestra comunidad se vuelva un refugio para los ricos. Inquilinos, dueños de edificios pequeños, así como los propietarios que respetan los derechos de los inquilinos, han de enfrentar la avaricia de las fuertes compañías de bienes y raíces con un rotundo ¡NO! a los que nos echan de nuestros hogares para así aumentar sus ganancias.

**Sat., Nov. 14**

## **March Against Arson-for-Profit**

**Gather 12 Noon at 12th St. & Washington**

(Site of the last arson)

**Rally 2 P.M. at City Hall**

**No More Arson Deaths! No More Displacements!**  
**Stop the War Against the Poor!**

13 Latino and Black victims, mostly children, have been killed by arson in the last 2 weeks, and at least 50 families have been burnt out of their homes this year. And tenants tell of threats by their landlords to get them out by any means necessary.

Evictions, harassment, and displacement have increased sharply since the Vacancy Decontrol law was passed on July 15th. Untold hundreds of low and moderate income working class families have been displaced to make way for the rich.

**The City Council and Mayor Capiello are to blame for these arson deaths because they passed Vacancy Decontrol and gave the landlords a financial incentive to drive out tenants!**

Vacancy Decontrol and other laws weakening rent control throughout New Jersey have been encouraged by the Reagan administration's war against the poor and workers. Local politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, have been working hard for the large landlords, the real estate companies, the banks, and big business against the interests of poor and working people. The result is displacements, layoffs, cutbacks in food stamps, welfare, medical care, public transportation, aid to housing, education and even the arts. Politicians are passing laws to increase landlords' profits, like Hoboken's decontrol law, but laws that are supposed to protect tenants' rights, like fire protection and against harassment, aren't enforced. In addition small home and store owners have been hit with enormous tax increases while the really wealthy get large tax breaks.

**Politicians Say Cut Back—We Say Fight Back!**

Hundreds of angry Hoboken residents packed City Hall to protest Vacancy Decontrol on July 15th. People in cities and towns all across this country are starting to resist the local effects of the federal program of gentrification, racism, cutbacks and the pouring of billions of dollars into the bloated Pentagon budget.

This fight back movement was seen when 500,000 workers and community groups marched against Reaganism on Solidarity Day, Sept. 19, in Washington, D.C. The people of Hoboken, as well, will not sit by while children are killed in arson fires and our city is turned into a preserve for

Whose children will be next?



the rich. Tenants and small home owners, as well as landlords who respect tenants' rights, must stand up and say 'No!' to the greed of the real estate interests and speculators who drive us out of our homes in order to make more profits.

**Stop the arson fires! Repeal Vacancy Decontrol now!**  
**Jail and prosecute all landlords violating the Smoke Detector or Rent Registration laws!**  
**Emergency housing for forcibly displaced tenants!**  
**Establish an independent tenant advocate office to enforce tenants' rights!**

Leaflet issued by: CUNA (Citizens United for New Action), N.J. All Peoples' Congress (APC), Other endorsers: Emergency Coalition to Save Rent Control in Hoboken, Hoboken Union of Tenants (HUT), Ana Mercado Organización de Rentantes (AMOR), Por la Gente/For the People

For more information call: 653-1770, 433-2332

Labor donated



[Whoever set the fires], they did three or four doors [and then no more]. They want to scare you. A lot of people moved. I went back in my apartment, but I was watching. We would stay in the front . . . We were watching the building. They don't do that again.

That was in 1975; my son was nine months. It was a little cool. [I remember] I had to get a blanket to cover my baby. And then he get sick; I don't have no jacket or anything [when taking him out of the building]. Overnight, we stayed outside. I don't work, [but] my husband was the one who had to go to sleep, because he was working. And then a couple of friends, we stay in the front, and we watched . . . But they never come back. [And then the owners of the building fixed the door.] They said that they don't know nothing. They never said nothing.

I stay there until 1977. Then I moved from there, because then Applied Housing [which was then buying and rehabilitating buildings to rent apartments to low income families] bought the building. They asked me, Applied Housing, if I wanted to live there, and I said no because back in the day, they were a little strict [about tenants and they had a lot of rules]. If you move to Applied Housing, they're watching you; you're not supposed to have a husband, you know what I mean, when you're on the welfare. Then I moved to 208 Ninth Street, across the street from Brandt School.

**OPPOSITE:** *Street cleaner at Willow Avenue and 11th Street, with the burned-out building in the background, photo by Caroline Carlson, circa 1974. Eleven people died in the 1973 arson fire.*



**ABOVE:** Competing mayoral campaign headquarters for longtime incumbent, Steve Cappiello, and insurgent Tom Vezzetti, who won. Photo by Michael Flannagan, 1985.

## So Many FIRES

The Pinter Hotel, that had the big fire. Do I remember it? There were people there . . . It was the middle of the night when that was on fire. I was in Garden Street by that time. Ninth and Garden.

Then on Clinton Street, the Indians [East Asian Indians]. . . it was like sixteen bodies. They bring them down. That was bad. A big fire. One apartment. They lived together, [all in one apartment]. In a group. Sixteen people, they said they were Indian. It had to be '78. Because I was going to the restaurant [on the corner there] when my son was two, three years old. I always go to the restaurant because they like the Spanish food. The kids would go, "Ma, let's go eat over there." And that was that time when that happened.

Hoboken was . . . it was crazy. Back in the day, there was a fire here, there was a fire there, there was one over here. I was like, What is this? They always said it was Mayor Cappiello [wanting to gentrify the city]. Like everyone has to leave. They want it clean. They want to clean Hoboken. That's what I always think. And look at it now. Hoboken is so different.

There were so many fires. There was one on 14th Street, back in the day, that was for nothing. It was like a fire for nothing. Everywhere. People—how many people died? [How many people left?] A lot of people.

## Back to SCHOOL

[In the 1990s I became] really close to Anthony Russo [a teacher who eventually became a councilman and then mayor]. Because he was a teacher of my sons. He was a teacher in Hoboken High School. And I was always working for his campaigns. [When he ran for councilman, and he] lost, we cried.

We found out, like a hundred people, they already died, they voted that day [for his opponent, Steve Cappiello]. [Laughs.] [We met at his headquarters], Fifth and Adams. He was crying. Because he thought he was going to win. For councilman.

That's when I started working with him. He say, "Milca, whatever you need," and I was like, "No, I don't need nothing. I got my job." Forty-nine Harrison [at that time]. But when they close it, I went by him, and I said, "OK, what you got for me?" I started [as a] crossing guard, Eleventh and Park. That was my corner, for September through November, three months. When I see this weather, windy, cold, raining, I said No! There was a little store on the corner and I would tell [the kids] "Hurry up, go, go!" I couldn't wait for all the kids to go home so I could go home. And I went by him and I said, "Uh-uh. You better get me something inside!" And then he gave me in the kitchen, on Brandt School. For lunch.

That was from kindergarten all the way to eighth grade. It was packed. But then they were needing security for the afternoon, and then the principal said "Milca, do you think you can do the security for three hours?" I said OK—then I've got two jobs. I got the morning for lunch

and then the one o'clock, I've got the security. And that was 1997. 1998 they give me full-time. They transfer me to Hoboken High School [for security only].

Back in the day, it was bad. Now Hoboken High School is better. When they [called for] security we had to go up there and there were kids using drugs after lunch, big fights, there were girls who were pregnant drinking something in the bathroom, we'd have to go . . . That was crazy. But now Hoboken High School has changed a lot. I stayed in the high school until 2001.

The boys were better with me. They would bring me breakfast. Because I understand. I was not rude with them. I'd say, "Listen, I tell you this, don't let me bring you up there [to the principal's office]. Follow the rule. You know you've got to have the pass to go to the bathroom. Don't come in my lobby with no pass because . . . and then you try to be fresh with me? I'll bring you to the principal. And I don't think you're going to like it. You be nice with me, you show me respect, I show you respect."

When they put [the Hoboken High School principal] in Wallace, he said, "Okay, but I want the security that we got at Hoboken High School. I want Milca in my building. I want that girl over here." And then he got me there. Fourteen years in Wallace.

The superintendent said he was going to transfer me. [When] they said they wanted me back in the high school, people signed a petition, No, no, no, no, no. They bring it to him and [they all know me as Milca]: "Who's Milquella? Who's that? Tell her to come and see me tomorrow morning." And he said, "What is this?" It was like 450 people sign. "You gonna stay."

I'm really nice with the parents. And the kids. I treat the kids like they're mine. I like them. Now I'm in Brandt, and this is my life. I've got the kids of the kids of the kids [I first met, when I started].

## The PANDEMIC

[Since the Covid-19 crisis began], I don't go nowhere. From my house to work. I don't get together with anybody I don't know. Only with my kids. That's it. From March 2020, I'm just gonna go to work, for school, [wear] my mask, come back. I don't let nobody go in my house. I don't go in nobody's house. I don't want to go out to eat in a restaurant. It was just me, and my kids that live in the first floor, the Aviles family. I live in the second floor; they live in the first floor. And they do the same thing, like I do. They don't go nowhere. They stay home. They don't even go to school. All my kids, they stay home.

I got [my shot] in February. I got my first one. Because of school. Over here, at the doctor right here. And March 23, was the second one. I got Moderna. The school sent us. I came with one group, with two teachers, one of the secretaries for Wallace.

Now I'm hoping. From the beginning, I was scared. I was so scared. I was watching the news, and I don't know, I went to sleep, and when I wake up, it was this guy saying you've got to make sure you have all your things [in order], your insurance, your bank . . . I wake up and I call my son. I started crying. He said, "Ma, don't let me go over there and take the TV away and throw it out the window. Stop watching this! The news is going to get

you crazy." And then I started to relax a little. Now I'm okay. I just wait till September 1st, to go back to school.

In the beginning, on the news you would see a truck, and they were putting the bodies in there because there was not enough room in the hospital. In the beginning, if I was going to Shoprite, I was wearing the gloves. As soon as I got home, I was washing my hands. In the beginning, I was a little panicked. But now, now I'm okay.

## STAYING *in Hoboken*

[With everything that happened in the city, I don't know why I stayed.] But I love Hoboken. I can't live in another town. I don't see me in Jersey City. I go to North Bergen and it's like I'm lost. Union City, I'm like . . . I'm Hoboken. I love my Hoboken.



**ABOVE:** Milca's two sons, Johnny (left) and Alex (right) coming down Ninth Street, 1979.



## The Hoboken Oral History Project

“Vanishing Hoboken,” an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to consequent “vanishing” of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken’s industrial base relocated over the 1970s and ’80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992.

In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken’s row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, in which affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, “Vanishing Hoboken”—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken” chapbooks. Since 2002,

thirty-five chapbooks—including this one—have been published, with the support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

## Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets “chapbooks,” a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, is a

...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapman, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the “Vanishing Hoboken” series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the “manners and morals” of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.



**ABOVE:** *Playing on the street, photo by Carol Halebien, circa 1978.*

**OPPOSITE AND FRONT ENDPAPERS:**

*Photos of Milca demonstrating to children how to use a hula hoop, photo by Robert Foster, circa 2021.*





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