



City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



Project Name: *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future*

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Interviewer: *Elaine Schwartz*

Audio and Video Recording: *Terilee Edwards-Hewitt*

Transcriber: *Christine Stoddard*

Abstract: Nora Partlow, owner of St. Elmo's Coffee Pub in Del Ray, Alexandria, was born in 1949 in Cuba. She has lived in Alexandria since 1985. During the interview, she recalls growing up on her grandfather's farm outside of Holguín, Cuba, before moving to New Jersey, attending school in the United States, getting married, and coming to Virginia to live her dream: running her own business, St. Elmo's Coffee Pub.

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Introduction and Childhood in Cuba	
Elaine Schwartz:	Good morning. Today is March 25, 2015. I'm interviewing Nora Paltrow—.
Nora Partlow:	Partlow.
E.S.:	Partlow—pardon me—who owns St. Elmo's Coffee Pub in Del Ray, Alexandria [Virginia]. I might add, a very popular and lovely place.
Nora Partlow:	Thank you.
E.S.:	That I have been to many times. And we are going to talk to Nora about her life and especially about her immigration to this country and to Alexandria in particular. So, Nora, why don't you start? I have your birthday down here as May 1949, and tell us where in Cuba you were born.
Nora Partlow:	Okay, I was born in a smaller area called Holguín, which actually is not a small area. It's, I believe, it's the second largest city in Cuba and it's on the western part of the island. And—.
E.S.:	This is before the revolution now.
Nora Partlow:	Oh, definitely! Yeah, 1949, definitely before the revolution.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Okay.
Nora Partlow:	It was—I guess after the war. You know, World War II.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Okay—okay. And tell us a little bit about your childhood.
Nora Partlow:	My childhood was really, really wonderful because, actually, I was raised, after I was born, my grandfather on my father's side owned a dairy farm. But in Cuba, a dairy farm is not just a dairy farm. There were also orchards, there was a plantation of bananas, which we call plantains here, you know, and, let's see—what other crops did he do? Besides the orchard, the orchard had oranges, lemons, limes—what other fruit? Papayas.
E.S.:	Wow, did you help him farm?
Nora Partlow:	No, but I observed because I was very young, and I think the fun part for me was that I was very free. I mean, since the time that I was able to walk, I was able to roam, and I think that is the most wonderful thing for a child to have is that availability of not being afraid of anything.

E.S.:	So you lived on a farm?
Nora Partlow:	Yes.
E.S.:	And your parents?
Nora Partlow:	Yes.
E.S.:	And did you have siblings, as well?
Nora Partlow:	At that time, no. I'm the eldest.
E.S.:	You're the eldest?
Nora Partlow:	The eldest of three.
E.S.:	Okay.
Nora Partlow:	And my brother came about four years later, so we're four years apart. And then my sister was born here in the United States.
E.S.:	Okay.
Nora Partlow:	But, anyway, it was a wonderful place to grow up, especially that [time], from birth to age seven. We lived in Havana probably a couple of years before we migrated to the United States. Um, my father was one of five in his family, so, you know, as rural people, you helped your father, and so he helped at the farm. But at a very young age, he always had other ambitions. And he always wanted to study more and he felt that the United States would give him that opportunity because at that time, that time of the [19]40s really in Cuba, there was only two societies: the very rich and the p[oor]—there was really no middle class.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] No middle class.
Nora Partlow:	Even though in, if we look back, we could consider my family, both on my mother's side and my father's side, so, middle class because they had those types of occupations, not just farming, but shop owners, accountant, teachers. You know, so, I'd consider that middle class.
Life in the United States: Age Seven Through High School	
E.S.:	And so, when did your father decide that you should come to the United States?
Nora Partlow:	In the middle [19]50s. And it was his—?
E.S.:	And you were how old?
Nora Partlow:	I was seven. I was seven. And we came through New York City, so Kennedy Airport, uh, that was our—we didn't come through, most people think Cubans come through Miami, but at that time really, Miami wasn't

	really the big thing. It wasn't after the revolution that then migration—.
E.S.:	And I always think that people come by boat from Cuba. [laughs]
Nora Partlow:	Yeah, no.
E.S.:	But, yeah, no, you came by air.
Nora Partlow:	TWA.
E.S.:	Yup.
Nora Partlow:	Yup, the big airplane at the time.
E.S.:	So where did you live first?
Nora Partlow:	We migrated to, uh, a little town called Perth Amboy in, uh, New Jersey. And I believe we went there because that's where was a small enc— what's the word?
E.S.:	Enclave.
Nora Partlow:	Enclave, yeah, of Cubans, which would include my uncle and some of, people that he knew from Cuba. Just like any immigrant, you know, group, they like to stick together.
E.S.:	Right.
Nora Partlow:	To support each other. And to help each other find jobs. And since it was a time, even though my father tried to learn English through the old system of mail-order, [laughs] you know, school. Remember?
E.S.:	Right.
Nora Partlow:	Learning that way. He tried to do that prior to coming here, but, of course, learning that and the actuality was totally different, so it took him a while, you know, to learn to converse in English.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Did you know any English?
Nora Partlow:	None. Both my mom and my brother and I had no English whatsoever. So I was plopped in a school where I was the only Hispanic girl. Everybody spoke English, no other language.
E.S.:	How did you survive? How did you—?
Nora Partlow:	Well, like everybody survives, you know. Uh, within, I came, let's see, at the end of the school year, which I think it was April. And, uh, by September, they kept, because it was the end, I had already finished third grade in Cuba, but I was, had to repeat it again because I didn't know the language. They didn't have any kind of transcripts or stuff like that, just started from scratch, just like that. So, by September, I was good to go and

	from then on—.
E.S.:	From June to September? You learned—.
Nora Partlow:	Yup.
E.S.:	Through television or—?
Nora Partlow:	Um, just being immersed because that's all you heard was English. There was nobody else.
E.S.:	Did your parents—?
Nora Partlow:	I only spoke Spanish at home.
E.S.:	I was just going to ask that.
Nora Partlow:	Oh, yeah. Spanish at home. So I'm bilingual. Totally bilingual.
E.S.:	Totally bilingual.
Nora Partlow:	I write it, read it because, then when I went to school, especially high school, I took Spanish all four years, which a lot of people say, "Why would you do that if you were already know how to speak it?" Well, just like you take English.
E.S.:	Yeah. [laughs]
Nora Partlow:	You have to learn how to write it [laughs], properly write it and read it and learn literature and all that kind of stuff, so that's why—.
E.S.:	And you might be the smartest person in the class, right? [Laughs]
Nora Partlow:	Well, you know, I was in a way because my English, I mean my Spanish, teacher was really wonderful and she felt that I would make a wonderful Spanish teacher, so she sort of, you know, was keeping me and we had, I think once a year, we would have where the students became the teacher. So I had that. I did that. That was kind of cool, you know, for me, being able to do that. And she said, "Oh, Nora, you would make a wonderful teacher and you should follow that." But of course I had other plans, and I wanted to be a businesswoman.
E.S.:	But I heard—.
Nora Partlow:	What?
E.S.:	I heard that you started taking leadership pretty early.
Nora Partlow:	Yes.
E.S.:	Did I see something about you taking class treasurer or something?
Nora Partlow:	Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. Definitely. I was always, I was always picked to be

	class president, things like that, but I didn't want to be president. I wanted to handle money.
E.S.:	[Laughs]
Nora Partlow:	It's funny, but it was [claps]. I remember in eighth grade—.
E.S.:	You knew where the power was.
Nora Partlow:	I know where the power is. And in eighth grade, when they told me, you know, "You gotta run for president," and stuff like that, Joey Ruella, I talked him into—that was a fella that I was really close to in my eighth grade class—I said, "You be president. I'm going to be the treasurer."
E.S.:	[Laughs]
Nora Partlow:	So we just gave ourselves that title and, of course, everybody voted for us, and that's what we became. [laughs]
E.S.:	[Laughs] And you did the back room deal pretty early there?
Nora Partlow:	Yes. Yes, so, in every—once I went into high school, it was the same thing and the clubs, I would always volunteer to be the cashier in any kind of, you know, fundraiser or anything like that. I always handled monies. So—.
The Cuban Revolution	
E.S.:	Now, during those high school years, were you sort of keeping touch with what was going on in Cuba?
Nora Partlow:	Oh, definitely. Yeah.
E.S.:	How did you—?
Nora Partlow:	My dad, my dad actually supported Castro because of the r—what was happening at that time when he left was that Batista was in power and he really was for the rich. And, really, what we needed. It's really sort of what's happening here in the United States now. That the people with power are controlling everything. They're in control of everything. And, at that time, there was two powers. There was the Americans that owned all the plantations, the coffee, the sugar, all those because they were in cahoots, just like the Mafia was in cahoots with Cuba. If you read any about Cuba's history, during that time, there was a lot of Mafia involved with the government and what they did.
E.S.:	Mafia, as in Italy?
Nora Partlow:	No. United States.
E.S.:	Oh.

Nora Partlow:	From the U.S.
E.S.:	Okay.
Nora Partlow:	You know, I can't think of some of those names right now, but they did all their business in Cuba.
E.S.:	Because there was some economic advantage—.
Nora Partlow:	Oh, yeah! All the—they did all the casinos, all the big clubs were all, like, pretty much owned by the Mafia.
E.S.:	So when did your dad become disillusioned or did he become disillusioned at some point?
Nora Partlow:	Well, that's one of the reasons why he came. Because I mean—.
E.S.:	No, I mean after—.
Nora Partlow:	He really couldn't have the opportunity, so he felt anybody else that was going to, you know, bring a difference and he saw that in Castro, which a lot of the people did because, at the beginning, he was promoting—and Communism didn't blend in until after the fact, when the United States did not want to partner with Castro. So then who came to the rescue was the Communists. So then, that's when he partnered with them and so, they were going to help him.
E.S.:	So did your dad and you all become disillusioned eventually with Castro?
Nora Partlow:	Yes. So even though my father supported him financially from here because there was many groups. One of them that I remember was called Alpha 66, which was some big organization here that fundraised for the revolution to support to Castro. And, of course, everything turned around once they found out, really, you know, what was happening. And what was going to be, you know, with the dictatorship.
After High School	
E.S.:	So let's pick up with your life. Uh, you graduated from high school.
Nora Partlow:	Yup.
E.S.:	You indicated that you had an interest in business even then.
Nora Partlow:	Yes, yes. Actually, all my courses, at that time, I think the thing was, you either did business or you did college prep. Nobody, not even my guidance counselor ever said, "Go to college and do business administration." Well, because then, women's choices—be a secretary, be a nurse.

E.S.:	Nurse. Teacher.
Nora Partlow:	Teacher. You know? That was the options. There wasn't any—there were none of the options that I wanted. Teacher might have been the only one and it was only because of my Spanish teacher that had said that she felt, you know, I had those talents of being a teacher, which I think all my life I have taught, but in a different way. Because having business, you have employees. When you're the boss, you have to teach.
E.S.:	So what did you do right after high school?
Nora Partlow:	So, right after high school, I worked for a large corporation called Feder's and they were manufacturers of air conditioning units, refrigeration. And I was a bilingual secretary for them right out of high school.
E.S.:	And were you meeting men at this point?
Nora Partlow:	Oh, I think because of, you know, I don't see myself as attractive, but other—when you long, black hair and straight, and being thin, and you know how we are when we're young, yes, I attracted—but, you know, I was never that kind of a girl. I was more interested in being myself. I never had any steady boyfriends during high school. I dated, but, you know, had fun going to dances and all that kind of stuff. But I never—because I always felt that if you tied yourself down, if you committed to one person, you didn't have then a choice to experience everything else.
First Marriage	
E.S.:	But you did marry eventually.
Nora Partlow:	Yes. I did.
E.S.:	And how old were you then?
Nora Partlow:	Actually, I didn't marry too young. I was twenty-one. And the reason—and it was a failed marriage. And it was because, my father, being the Hispanic culture, he only, the only thing he told me, either, you go to college, which, you know, we fought about because what he wanted me to go to college and what I wanted to do was totally different. I wanted to join the military and that was during the Vietnam War. He said no. So, everything he'd seen that I wanted to do, he was contradicting me. So, I said, "Well, what other choice do I have?" He says, "Well, the only way you leave my house is if you're married." So the first young man that said, "I love you," I said, "Well, this is my ticket." I'm out of here. So I agreed and I got married. He was a wonderful man, wonderful family. And what was really neat about it was—.
E.S.:	And you had children?

Nora Partlow:	Yes. And what was really neat about it was that my parents and my first husband's family knew each other. Neighbors. So, of course, they, everybody approved of this wonderful marriage. And—.
E.S.:	Was he as young as you?
Nora Partlow:	Yeah, he was a little younger. One year younger. So everything worked out fine. I was actually married for about thirteen years, but even the day pri—or I should say weeks, prior to getting married, I was having these nightmares of like, “What are you doing? And how could—but I said, “No, you know, everything's going to work out.” So it was, you know, the demon inside saying, you know, telling me not to go ahead, but then [pauses] it was like a tug-of-war. And I said, “No, it will work out. You will be fine. You'll be able to—.”
E.S.:	It was expected in those days, right?
Nora Partlow:	Yes, yes. But, remember the [19]60s was revolution for the women, so that was the big thing when we let go of pant—uh, the garter belts and we got pantyhose. And then, uh, women's lib—.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Girdles.
Nora Partlow:	Right, with girdles. Uh, birth control pills. You know, all those things were introduced, which I was sort of part of. I embraced all that. You know, talk about, uh, what was her name? The one that has the—.
E.S.:	Gloria Steinem?
Nora Partlow:	Yes. I was such a fan. And, actually, I got to see her live here finally about a year ago when her magazine celebrated fifty years or sixty years or something like that. It was pretty big. And a friend of mine, you know, invited me to go. She was at the Press Club in [Washington] D.C. And it was just, like, to me, that was like, my god, because of all the changes that she had, you know, done for women.
E.S.:	So during the thirteen years, though, you did have—?
Nora Partlow:	Two children, a boy and a girl.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Okay.
Nora Partlow:	Because I have four.
E.S.:	Were you working during that marriage?
Nora Partlow:	No, but that was part of the, the, because I worked till the very, till I got married. And then once I got married, part of the rules were you become a housewife. And then of course, he had a good job so he could support me

	<p>very well. But I struggled being an at-home mom. I wanted to be out there. I wanted to have the business. I wanted to—I wanted to do things. Being a mother was just not enough. So I struggled because I wanted to get out there and he would always say to me, “No.” I mean, I would try to do other businesses, you know, to start my own little businesses and he would always say, “Remember, family comes first.”</p>
E.S.:	<p>Were you still living in New Jersey then?</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>Yes.</p>
E.S.:	<p>Okay.</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>Family comes first. And it wasn’t till, hmmm, I mean, I—all those years, I struggled of, like, “What are you going to do? How are you going to get out of this? How are you going to move forward?” And because of that—was the main—I think if he would’ve agreed to that, I would’ve been happy living with him.</p>
E.S.:	<p>You mean if you had been able to work?</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>Exactly. Build a business, you know, get out there and be myself.</p>
E.S.:	<p>[Overlapping] If he made it a choice.</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>Yeah, and so, that was the breaking point, when I said, “I can’t live.” Because then I became depressed, very, very depressed.</p>
E.S.:	<p>How old were your children then?</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>Nine and eleven when I finally said, “Enough. I’ve had enough.”</p>
E.S.:	<p>And they were in school all day?</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>And I said no. And we sat down. It was a very good kind of break-up because we—[laughs] I should’ve, I think that’s where I would’ve made my money if I would’ve wrote everything down because we actually had, like, a pow-wow. We sat at the table, told the kids, and we told them the reasons why, and we gave them a choice: “Where do you want to go, with Mom or with Dad?” And Mom was leaving. And that’s when I came to Virginia.</p>
<p>Coming to Virginia</p>	
E.S.:	<p>And was year was that?</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>[19]80—[19]83 was when I made the decision. It took me two years to figure out exactly what I was going to do.</p>
E.S.:	<p>Did you come straight to Alexandria?</p>

Nora Partlow:	Yes.
E.S.:	And your children did or did not come with you?
Nora Partlow:	No. We had shared custody but because of the school and I didn't want to take them out of their home, it was like a visitation thing, back and forth. So I did that until they turned old enough they could go to college and then they came with me.
E.S.:	So what did you do when you first got to Virginia?
Nora Partlow:	I worked for a company. Prior to leaving New Jersey, I became a rep for Party Light Gifts out of Massachusetts and it's really being an independent consultant pretty much and being your own business. And I had built a team of, like, thirteen women working for me. So I had reached a top with them, and, which was really good. And I spoke to them about what I was doing with my personal life. They said, "Well, there's no reps in that area, so we're going to put you on a—." I've always worked also on commission only. And you know, it's like a car salesman or like real estate. You really have to be very, very organized, very focused to make a living, to support yourself on commission only. And so I think I had that structure for myself.
E.S.:	So you liked doing that?
Nora Partlow:	Oh, loved it.
E.S.:	That was your mot—some people hate that, but—?
Nora Partlow:	No.
E.S.:	That was your motivation.
Nora Partlow:	That was my motivation. Because I know the sky's the limit. When that's available to you, the sky's the limit. And you really have to work, work, work, work every day. You can't slack off knowing that you're going to get a paycheck on Friday, see? And, so, to me, that's why I've never really worked—a very short time in my working life have I worked for somebody else. I've always worked for myself.
E.S.:	Wow.
Nora Partlow:	And, here, the only time I worked for somebody else was to find out how to, uh, work restaurants.
E.S.:	So let me backtrack a little bit. You had this business with the seven people working for you. And you said you reached the top?
Nora Partlow:	Yup. I had reached the top. By that I mean, was that I was in management

	with them. And, then when I spoke to the president and I told him what I was doing, he said, “Okay, go to Virginia. We’ll put you on salary just so you can get your feet on the ground. And then work it.” So I worked at that for a little while.
E.S.:	And where were you living in Virginia then?
Nora Partlow:	I was living on Braddock Road in an apartment.
E.S.:	Pretty close to here.
Nora Partlow:	Yup, yeah, pretty close to here. So I’ve always been in this area, in the Del Ray area, Alexandria area. It wasn’t until after I got married that we bought a house and it literally is on the border.
E.S.:	Now, wait a second. Married again? Okay.
Second Marriage and Alexandria Entrepreneurship	
Nora Partlow:	Yes, I got married in [19]85.
E.S.:	Okay, and I think I read that you—.
Nora Partlow:	No, was it [19]85—I’m trying to think. We’ve been married [unclear]. You forget these dates. Uh, [19]83. [19]85 was when I came. No, I didn’t get married until [19]86.
E.S.:	And you met, if I recall reading something, on a dance floor in Crystal City.
Nora Partlow:	Correct, correct. [Pauses] And it was a wonderful thing because, at that time, the last thing I wanted to do, because I finally found my freedom to do whatever I wanted, was to get m—connected with, with a male.
E.S.:	[Laughs]
Nora Partlow:	So it was funny because, for him, it was like love at first sight kind of thing. And so, he had to, like sort of, wean me into what he already he had in his mind and sorta—and so, uh, the first few dates we had was all about talking about my background, what I wanted to do, and if he was going to accept me like that. Because I told him I would never be put down again. I would always be my own woman. It would be a fifty-fifty marriage, you know, contribution financially—.
E.S.:	Was he divorced or had been married?
Nora Partlow:	No, he was—he had never been married.
E.S.:	Okay.
Nora Partlow:	Had no kids. And his thing was, he had already done all the single fun

	stuff [laughs] and he was ready to get married and have kids and all that kind of stuff. The only difference between my first husband and him was that he was very supportive, very supportive from day one of whatever it took to make me successful, to make me happy, he was going to do it. So kids could come in the picture, but that did not stop me from—.
E.S.:	So, you agreed to have children, but you still wanted to work?
Nora Partlow:	Yes.
E.S.:	And did you have other children?
Nora Partlow:	Yes, two more.
E.S.:	Wow.
Nora Partlow:	So I had two more.
E.S.:	And so how old were you when you married a second time?
Nora Partlow:	I was thirty—.
E.S.:	Thirty-something.
Nora Partlow:	It was in the thirties. Middle thirties. Probably thirty-five, thirty-six. Something like that. Because I had my second, I think, I was, like, thirty-seven. And my fourth, I mean my third child, at thirty-seven and I think my last one at thirty-eight. So, it wasn't, you know—.
E.S.:	And you went to work right away?
Nora Partlow:	Yeah, pretty much!
The Story of St. Elmo's Coffee Pub	
E.S.:	So tell us how did this lovely place come to be?
Nora Partlow:	This lovely place came to be, I, through a friend of my husband, and this while I was still doing the candle thing. I was still working for Party Light. Um, they owned the Snuggery Cafe, which is now, which used to be where the Evening Star is now. And this was in the [19]80s. And it was his friend, best friend from childhood, they owned it. It was him and his wife that ran it.
E.S.:	And was that a coffee house?
Nora Partlow:	No. That was a full-fledged restaurant.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Restaurant.
Nora Partlow:	And so, one night, uh, while my fourth child was, uh, she was born November, so this was, like, January, she gave me a call at home and she's, "Nora, would you like to help us down at the restaurant?" I said,

	<p>“I’ve never done restaurant work before.” She said, “Just do what you do best, which is being a great hostess. And that’s what we want you to be, is a hostess. So could you come down and help on just Saturday nights?” And that started the whole thing of my learning about restaurants.</p>
E.S.:	So you greeted people?
Nora Partlow:	Yes, I greeted people, I sat them down.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] But you didn’t stop there. [laughs]
Nora Partlow:	Oh, no.
E.S.:	You started learning the business.
Nora Partlow:	<p>I started learning the business. And, from there, then she says, “Okay, you want to do some waitressing?” “Yes.” So I did waitressing. And then a position opened in the bar. She says, “You want to try bartending?” “Yes, I’ll try bartending.” I probably would’ve stayed with them, but because it was a family-owned, there was no going up the ladder. They ran everything. They were managers, you know, [laughs] they did everything. And so I really—and so, uh, the cook that left there and went to work for Bread and Chocolate called me up. He says, “There’s a management position open at Bread and Chocolate. I think you’d be ideal.”</p>
E.S.:	In Old Town?
Nora Partlow:	<p>Yes. So I called and they hired me and I became a manager of Bread and Chocolate. And I went to work at the King Street location. And they were just ready to revamp, so I was part of the team of, of renovation there. And I worked for them for about three years. And all during that time, they didn’t know it, but they were training me to open up St. Elmo’s. Because when I left, I took all their forms, all their everything. I just scratched over Bread and Chocolate and put St. Elmo’s Coffee Pub, literally.</p>
E.S.:	Where did the name come from?
Nora Partlow:	<p>This is the St. Elmo’s neighborhood, so that’s number one. Number two, it’s the patron saint of sailors. Alexandria is a port city.</p>
E.S.:	Ah.
Nora Partlow:	Everybody thinks of—.
E.S.:	The movie.
Nora Partlow:	<p><i>St. Elmo’s Fire</i>, yes. The movie. But, no, it is all about neighborhood. And, of course, I was—I want to backtrack a little bit because, prior to me finding this location, I was going to open up a flower shop because, in</p>

	between doing Party—you know, Party Lights—I started to, I joined the garden club over in my community over in Arlington, which I’m still a member. That’s like twenty-eight years being a member. I love flowers. And I learned enough that I thought I could open up a flower shop—.
E.S.:	So, excuse me, when you married the second time, you moved to your current neighborhood in Arlington? Or—?
Nora Partlow:	Yes, yes. I’ve been in the same spot, in the same house, since I got married.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Okay, okay.
Nora Partlow:	And, anyway, so what I did was I started a small wedding flower business out of my own home. And so I started doing wedding flowers. And I got my clients from working at the coffee—I mean, restaurant, talking to people.
E.S.:	You got the wedding flowers from your own garden?
Nora Partlow:	No. Some, little bit. But, most of them, you know, you purchase just like flower shops do.
E.S.:	And then you just make them into—.
Nora Partlow:	Yeah, you know. Yeah, just like, you know, just like a floral arranger. You sit down with the client. “What do you want?” “What kind of flowers?” “Color?” You know, so I—it’s some part consultation and then arran—I did the whole thing myself.
E.S.:	And you were able to work from your home?
Nora Partlow:	Yes, I was able to work from my home because I had plenty of room to set up refrigeration and, you know, space to design and all that. So I did that for—in the meantime. Anyway, an opportunity opened up on Duke Street and I don’t know if you remember the little white house that used to put out buckets of flowers. It’s now a used car place, right before the shopping center where there’s—let’s see—past Generous George’s. Remember Generous George’s?
E.S.:	Yes [laughs]. I live right there.
Nora Partlow:	Okay, so just part Generous George’s was this little white building—.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Right.
Nora Partlow:	And it was a flower shop.
E.S.:	Okay.
Nora Partlow:	During that time. And those people owned another location and they

	wanted to sell this one. So I got, you know, got together with them and we interviewed. They loved me. They said yes, this would be a great, you know, thing. So I was going to take over with the option to purchase it. And I was ready to go and sign the papers when my good friend and my husband's good friend from college days, Scott Mitchell, called up and said, "Nora, I have this wonderful opportunity for you and me. We have to sit down." I said, "Oh, no, Scott! I'm going to—" He said, "No! Don't sign anything until you meet with me!" So immediately, I held that off for a day and met with Scott. He came and showed me the location.
E.S.:	This location?
Nora Partlow:	This location. He said, "I just purchased this building and I have an idea to open up a coffee shop." Bango! This is what, what I had already been planning, to open up some sort of restaurant on the avenue. And it was not a coffee shop. But it was going to be some kind of diner. I wanted to do some kind of New Jersey style, which is breakfast and lunch. That was going to be my thing on the avenue. So when he said that, I said, "Oh my God." Everything just came into place. And, so, since he didn't have that knowledge and I did, then he became, he bought, he had just purchased the property. And so then we just got together and made a business plan. We were going to be business partners, fifty-fifty. I would run it and he'd just be the support person.
E.S.:	And, did you, and you still planned to have it be a breakfast-lunch restaurant, more restaurant type of thing?
Nora Partlow:	No, we were going to make it a coffee shop.
E.S.:	Oh, now you were going to do a coffee shop.
Nora Partlow:	Yeah.
E.S.:	All right.
Nora Partlow:	Yeah, a coffee shop because during this time—this was right before Starbucks became national. So then what we did was, since really Starbucks was the first coffee chain that was serving gourmet coffee. To that point, all we had was 7-11, you know, dinky diner coffee. Sanka.
E.S.:	Dunkin' Donuts.
Nora Partlow:	Dunkin' Donuts. That's—so Starbucks then raised the bar to what coffee should be. And so we followed that.
E.S.:	Is there a Starbucks nearby?
Nora Partlow:	No, and there wasn't. And then what we did, we did a lot of research. Actually, St. Elmo's became my baby. From the day I met with Scott to

	<p>the day that we opened was nine months. So exactly nine months, how you carry a baby, a child. So I saw that as, you know, there were steps every month. There was a lot of coffee-tasting all over. We went all over. We went to Seattle. You know, all these different roasters. We wanted to learn. We even met the founder of Starbucks. And, uh, you know, just read books and a lot, like I said, a lot of tastings. We learned a lot about coffee. And so we could then, uh, have the great vision of what we wanted to do. We wanted to be like Starbucks, but we felt that Starbucks did a lot of things that we didn't want to do. And one of them was, we wanted to be a community place. Like most restaurants, they believe that the model is flip tables, flip tables, flip tables. Starbucks is get them in, [snaps] get them out, [snaps] get them in, [snaps] get them out. [snaps] We wanted a place, because this is what I heard from my customers as a bartender, was, "We want a place where we can hang out like a bar but with no alcohol."</p>
E.S.:	With nice, comfy chairs.
Nora Partlow:	<p>Exactly. With nice, comfy chairs, where everybody's welcome. Kids, dogs, blah, blah, blah. And so then, that's what our focus was. We were going to—so that's what our tagline is "A community gathering place." And it has been since day one. Through the years, and it's just been, I say, the last four or five years, that they say St. Elmo's is Del Ray's living room.</p>
E.S.:	Wow.
Nora Partlow:	<p>Because, when we opened that first year, from April when we opened to December, Mancini's then came in. Evening Star then came in. And all those places, guess where they did all their business dealings? At St. Elmo's was where they planned to open. And we were very welcoming because Del Ray was not Del Ray at that time.</p>
E.S.:	That's what I was going to ask you. I mean, I lived in Old Town. Not in Old Town, but about two miles west of Old Town.
Nora Partlow:	Right. Right.
Del Ray Back Then	
E.S.:	And-. But Del Ray has the reputation—.
Nora Partlow:	It had a stigma.
E.S.:	Of being a neighborhood now.
Nora Partlow:	But then it had the stigma of being the pit. If you talked to anybody that is my age and younger, they will tell you that all their parents used to say,

	“Don’t you set foot in Del Ray.” It was a really bad place.
E.S.:	Bad like in dangerous?
Nora Partlow:	Dangerous, exactly. Because Del Ray, not like Old Town, went through the riots, racial riots, all that kind of stuff, where, you know, this was very diverse in racial.
E.S.:	So what do you think started turning it around? And—.
Nora Partlow:	Me!
E.S.:	And don’t be modest. [laughs]
Nora Partlow:	[Laughs] Me! They gave us credit, but we didn’t set out to do that. Remember, the only reason we were here was because he bought this property, but because he worked here and I worked here, we knew who was here. We knew that these were the people who were going to support us. And they weren’t bad people. They were good people, like him and I. And nobody else saw that. Because we did our research, when I did my research.
E.S.:	Was he, your partner, was he a native Amer—?
Nora Partlow:	Yes.
E.S.:	Okay, I don’t mean a Native American. I mean—.
Nora Partlow:	Yes, yes.
E.S.:	I mean, born in the U.S.
Nora Partlow:	Not just born in the U.S. but in Alexandria.
E.S.:	Okay.
Nora Partlow:	He’s been, and his family’s been, in Alexandria forever. And he knew [pause] the area. This is, when he finished college, this is where he started his business. He was a painting contractor. He, you know, this is where he started his business. He started buying little bungalows, fixing them up. After he started painting, he started that, you know. Where he’d go, “Oh, look. I can make more money doing this.” So now, he’s a very successful developer. That’s what he does. And he owns half of the avenue.
St. Elmo’s Coffee Pub Today	
E.S.:	And he’s still your partner?
Nora Partlow:	No, I bought him out about ten years ago, in 2007. And it was because he was really the mind of flipping. And, so, he was ready to flip. So he says,

	<p>“Okay, so you going to buy me out?” And I say, “Sure,” because it was just the two of us. He offered me the building, but, at that time, I couldn’t afford both the business and the building, which was the worst mistake I’ve ever made. Because if I would’ve owned my building, I would’ve been here forever. Unfortunately, I’m having problems right now.</p>
E.S.:	<p>What kind?</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>With my current landlord.</p>
E.S.:	<p>Don’t tell me St. Elmo’s is in danger?</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>Yes.</p>
E.S.:	<p>Of not being here.</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>Yes. And it’s because, really, and, you know, I as being a businessperson and knowing that people go into business just because of, you know, like me, I love it, for passion. Yes, I have built and I have raised a family and made my own job, pretty much. This is, this is my life. And I’ve been able to pay myself enough that I can send all my kids through college, you know, bought a house, and supported myself through St. Elmo’s. That’s it. I’m not a millionaire. I don’t have big, big, you know, bank accounts and stuff like that. Because that’s all I wanted.</p>
E.S.:	<p>Do you—?</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>But people see, because of the success of St. Elmo’s and they associated me with my partner, they always thought that I was a millionaire and I owned—believe me, when I talk to customers, “You shouldn’t be complaining. You’re a millionaire. You know this and this.” I say, “No, Scott’s not my husband. He was my partner. That’s his business. This is my business.” So I had to—but yet, it’s perception. It’s the perception that people see. It’s just like they said, “Oh, you’re making so much money.” No. If I don’t, if I wasn’t busy on Saturday and Sunday, I wouldn’t be able to carry the rest of the week [laughs] when it’s not so busy.</p>
E.S.:	<p>You are open seven days a week.</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>Seven days a week, 16 hours a day.</p>
E.S.:	<p>And are you here?</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>Uh, pretty much every day.</p>
E.S.:	<p>And how much staff do you have?</p>
Nora Partlow:	<p>Right now I have thirteen, with a general manager, and he’s the one that has been able to give me the opportunity to do this, so I can—.</p>

E.S.:	I forgot. Now you're doing real estate now, too.
Nora Partlow:	Yeah, yup.
On Being an Immigrant	
E.S.:	So do you think that being an immigrant has in any way contributed to your drive?
Nora Partlow:	Yes, definitely, definitely. Not being afraid. I think most immigrants and if you see the very successful ones, like, I can tell you, German from Los Tíos. I mean, there's many of them. Rhoda Worku from Caboose. I—she was a friend of mine. I started her in that business.
E.S.:	And being willing to start at the bottom, too.
Nora Partlow:	Yes.
E.S.:	Yes.
Nora Partlow:	Not, not being—having that pride that you can't scrub floors. Because what's coming now are the people that, they'll buy a business and have people hired to do it, but they don't set foot in there. All they do is they do the collecting. To me, this is what has made St. Elmo's special is that my face is there. They see my sweeping. Just yesterday, one of my [laughs]—two of my old-time customers, the minute they saw me, I was out there straightening tables. I came and sat and they started laughing. They said, "Nora, you don't have to do that." I did, "Why not? I'm the owner. I want it a certain way and I'm going to do it."
E.S.:	Where do you think you would be if you had stayed in Cuba?
Nora Partlow:	Hmm, that's a question that I've never been asked and I'm not sure where I would be, but I'm pretty sure that—you're born with a drive. And I followed in my father's footsteps. Not—.
E.S.:	He took, he took the really big risk, right?
Nora Partlow:	He took big risks.
E.S.:	Because he wanted to—.
Nora Partlow:	Yes. And my mom was very strong, but I never saw my mother as strong as my father. And, again, it was because of that thing of keeping woman at home kind of mentality. Just like he tried to keep me, you know, at home.
E.S.:	What about your siblings? Do they have the same drive?
Nora Partlow:	Yes, yes. Uh, my younger sister, not as much.

E.S.:	She was born here, you said.
Nora Partlow:	Because she was born here. And she was spoiled because she was the last one. So it was a totally different mentality. But my brother, yes. My brother has his own business also.
E.S.:	What is he doing?
Nora Partlow:	Right now, he's retired. He retired early. He was a pipefitter in the union, so, you know, that's a pretty good job. And, so, he was in New Jersey just 'til he retired. He's in Florida now. But he also, before, he also had a business. He owned a bar in New Jersey, which his wife and him ran. His wife pretty much ran it, you know, but they were both owners.
Future Plans	
E.S.:	I guess the last question would be, if the unthinkable happens, and you do have to lose St. Elmo's, what will you do next?
Nora Partlow:	Well, I am planning on continuing with Coldwell Banker. They're—they give me the freedom again. I'm pretty sure all the companies would, but they've been very supportive with education.
E.S.:	You mean in terms of your training?
Nora Partlow:	Yes, yes, yes. And so, I'm a learner. I don't stop learning. Every day I—
E.S.:	Sounds like you're never going to retire.
Nora Partlow:	Eh, no, no.
E.S.:	No.
Nora Partlow:	And that wasn't my plan for St. Elmo's, either. I was hoping that I could keep it forever. Unfortunately, none of my four kids wanted it because they saw how much work it is, so they're—I gave them wings and they flew. And they are all over the place, doing their own thing. So, I never said to them, "You must stay in the family business," because I didn't want that restriction put on me, so I'm not going to put that on them. [Pauses] My youngest son has been with me for fourteen years, which is amazing.
E.S.:	With you at St. Elmo's?
Nora Partlow:	At St. Elmo's. He's the only one of the three that are stuck with me, but he's leaving me next month. He's going to L.A. [Los Angeles]. He's spreading his wings, finally.
E.S.:	And where are the other children?

Nora Partlow:	There's another one in L.A., in the film industry.
E.S.:	Can't get much further.
Nora Partlow:	Nope. And another one that was in Alaska, but he just moved to Oregon.
E.S.:	[Overlapping] Oh, my goodness.
Nora Partlow:	And he has a job, traveling, so he's in South America, has been in South America for about five weeks with his job. And then I do have a—my oldest daughter, she's in North Carolina, so at least she's on the East Coast. She's the one who has three children, out of four. So I have four grandchildren, all boys. So she has three and my oldest has one, the one that lives in Oregon. And she is into education. She's not like me, you know. She's not an upfront person. She likes working in the background, so she's an administrator in education, preschool.
E.S.:	And would you ever think of leaving Northern Virginia?
Nora Partlow:	[Pause] It's going to be after this winter. It's going to be kind of hard, but Florida is calling, so, you know, we'll see. My husband's not ready to retire, so I'm probably going to be around here for a while and I'm not going away.
E.S.:	Well, speaking on behalf of probably everybody I know, I hope St. Elmo's stays right where it is. And, Nora, thank you so much for taking the time to talk.
Nora Partlow:	Well, I hope it was a good one. Thank you so much.