

## Maria Aponte Summer of '79



My first time at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe was in 1979. I had written a poem about street life and how I saw and experienced it as a Puerto Rican woman living in the Bronx. I met Miguel Algarín at the Cafe and I will never forget that day because one thing he said changed my life and how I would view my work as an artist in the future. I remember coming down to the Cafe which was located at that time on 6th Street. The Cafe was a storefront, and the bar was on the right-hand side, tables and chairs scattered about like leaves thrown on the floor. I came down to

the Cafe in the middle of the week and the first time I saw Miguel, he was sweeping the floor. I walked up to him and introduced myself and followed it with, "I wrote a poem!" and he looked at me with that beautiful, dimpled smile and said, "that's nice." Little did he know that I was shaking in my shoes. My stomach was in a knot and I told him it was my first poem and I wanted to read it at the Cafe. Miguel just looked at me and said, "Fridays, we have open mic come back then." I had no idea what he meant so I asked and that's when he told me I could sign up after the featured poets and read my poem. I thanked him and came back the following Friday to read my piece.

That Friday I made such a fuss about reading my poem that I had invited the Bronx Family down to the Cafe. You would think I was doing a full production! The Family came all dressed to the nines because right after we were heading to a salsa club back up to the Bronx. When it came time to read my piece I was scared, nervous and had no idea what I would sound like. The piece was called... is still called Street Sights. I read it and got a nice round of applause. I felt like I found my voice. I wasn't told that my English was not correct nor my accent not acceptable. And Spanglish was a language. I felt like I found a home. As I sat with my Bronx Family someone put a beer on the table in front of me. I looked up and said I didn't order a beer. The person who gave me the beer pointed at the table across from me and told me that the guy all in black sent it over to congratulate me on the poem. It was Pedro Pietri. And as they say the rest is history.

Over the years I would see Miguel at readings, go to the Cafe and be a part of poetry programs held there. Whenever I came down to the Cafe, I would always offer to buy him coffee and sometimes pick up something for him to eat from Casa Adela. I always thanked him for giving me that opportunity which I know he probably didn't remember since so many people had come in and out of his life and his professional life was huge. But I always reminded him, and he would laugh and give me a hug. Miguel opened a door for me that led me to work with some of our most beloved Nuyorican Poets of the time and I was given an opportunity to learn, grow and stay open to change. Becoming a Nuyorican Poeta gave me and continues to give me a foundation of pride, of history, of celebrating Puerto Rican women. And so again, I thank you Miguel for that day while sweeping the floor of the Cafe when you said, "come back on Fridays for the open mic."

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**Maria Aponte** is a Poet/Performance Artist/ Community Arts Activist/Educator. She is a two-time recipient of the International Latino Book Award for *Transitions of a Nuyorican Cinderella*. *And The Gift of Loss*, her memoir dealing with the loss of her parents as a young teenager/adult and the healing process from that loss. Maria has her Master's degree in Latin American/Latino Studies from the Graduate School of Arts & Science at Fordham University. She was the Assistant Director of Global Diversity and Inclusion in Career Services at Fordham University. She retired from there in the fall of 2020 <http://www.mariaaponte.com>