


Rosa Grillo on Sharing Her Family’s History With the Smithsonian

 sarasotamagazine.com/news-and-profiles/2023/05/rosa-grillo

1. 
2. [News & City Life](#)
3. [Listening to Diverse Voices](#)
4. [Rosa Grillo on Sharing Her Family’s History With the Smithsonian](#)

Listening to Diverse Voices

“The most important thing for me is that the world understands that the American Latino community is as varied as the larger American community.”

By [Bethany Ritz](#) May 4, 2023

This article is part of the series [Listening to Diverse Voices](#), proudly presented by Gulf Coast Community Foundation.





Rosa Grillo
Image: Michael Kinsey

Rosa Grillo's career as a community engagement and marketing executive consulting with nonprofits and arts institutions on social innovation, diversity and inclusion is rooted in a rich family history.

Grillo grew up with Cuban roots in Washington, D.C. from Cuba, where her parents settled in a Latino community close to Howard University, which her father attended before earning his law degree at American University's Washington College of Law. Grillo's father moved north after spending his childhood in Tampa with his siblings, including his brother, Rosa's uncle Evelio Grillo, who wrote the seminal memoir *Black Cuban, Black American*. That book became an influential reflection on how segregation affected Black Americans during World War II, as well as life as Evelio experienced it through community, family and the wider world. In addition to being a writer, Evelio was a community organizer and a public advocate for civil rights.

More recently, Grillo's family and community photos and history are featured in the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Latino's new exhibit, *iPresente!: A Latino History of the United States*, shown in the Molina Family Latino Gallery of the National Museum of American History.

“These are historical documents, essentially,” says Ranald Woodaman, the exhibitions director at the National Museum of the American Latino. “When people ask, ‘How was D.C.’s Latino community created?,’ some people might say, ‘This community didn’t start until the late ‘70s, when Salvadorans were fleeing civil war.’ Older origins for the community were more hearsay before meeting Rosa. Her family photos show that, actually, we need to look earlier to World War II when we had migrants from Florida with Caribbean backgrounds. Now we can show how one family is connected to another family in D.C.—proof that the Latino community in D.C. had a different origin.”

The museum exhibit reveals, not only the history of Latin contributions to American history but also the way that this culture loved, lived and celebrated, seemingly on the margins and yet at the very center of American life. “We gave a tour to Rosa’s extended family,” says Woodaman. “It was an emotional experience for all of us because it was like, ‘We’re being seen. We’re not just part of history, but we’re a vehicle for people to have an understanding of not only the Cuban American experience but also American history as a whole.’”

With a family experience and history crossing many cultural divides, Grillo’s interest in diversity bloomed into a focus on Equal Employment Opportunity awareness and cross-cultural awareness. She is the principal consultant for Grillo Strategies, a management consultant firm specializing in marketing strategies, multicultural campaigns and solutions, corporate identity, media relations and public awareness campaigns. In 2020, Grillo moved to Sarasota, where she served as the public relations and marketing manager at The Ringling and has been involved in the Howard Club and ASALH, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. She recently spoke with *Sarasota Magazine* about her life and career. This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

What was it like growing up where you did in D.C.?

“When we were kids, growing up, the Caribbean Latinos were closer to us: the Dominicans, the Cubans, the Puerto Ricans. There weren’t many other Latinos in D.C. at the time unless you worked for the embassies, because every embassy was there. So, yes, you might get to know South Americans if they mixed in the community. But we were all children of immigrants who were settling in and finding their way in a city that was really polarized racially. It wasn’t like in New York or Miami, where there was a significant Latino community of all colors. In D.C., you were either Black or white, so we were Black.

“It was living a double life for me. When we were in school, we were very African American, then we would come home and the music would be different. There would be Spanish-language music. The food would be Latin, although my mother learned to cook Southern food.

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“When my dad brought my mother to D.C. from Cuba, he brought her to the part of town that was Latin. But when they were ready to buy a house, they moved into an African American community that was just being built, with new construction. Our neighbors were Pullman porters, post office workers, teachers or cab drivers. It was a cool neighborhood, with a civic association and neighborhood baseball teams.

“It was tough for my mother, because she was an immigrant and wasn’t that comfortable speaking English, but she learned African American cooking. We had the best soul food in our house, plus all the great Cuban food. We ate well. And music was always a mix—Motown and salsa. Latins were very much into jazz, R&B.

“Mine was more of an American experience when I was out of the house, and more Latin when I was in. Within my family, my experience was more Latin than my brothers’ because they were older, and they were out in the world more. In Latin families, a girl stays close to mama. She never really let me out of her sight and so I’m the one that’s more fluent in Spanish than my brothers were.

“But there were some differences because we really were an immigrant family. Although my father was U.S.-born in Tampa, it was still a different situation than the other Black families that we were around.”

What was the community like in D.C. where you grew up?

“The Spanish-speaking community in Washington was growing, so they would have major Latino festivals. They would take over a city park and have food and music and dancing and things like that. Plus, there was always somebody’s baptism or wedding where people would gather. It might be in someone’s backyard or whoever had the big house or in the hall of the church. Our weekday experiences were very American, but I think my mother actually lived for the weekends when we would go across town to be in the Latino community. It was a long bus drive that she and I used to take so she could over to the grocers there to buy the food she liked to cook. Not just to find the foods that she wanted, but to have conversations with folks in the stores in the bodegas, instead of the big supermarkets where we lived.

“My brothers and I started in the neighborhood public schools, but eventually, we transitioned to Catholic schools and studied for the first time with white students.”

What was your father like?

“My dad was totally bi-lingual and bi-cultural. He was a hard worker. His mother sent her children north for education and opportunity not easily available to Blacks in the South. My uncle tells a story of how he was sent north with a \$5 bill and [a trusted member of the African American community in Tampa at the time], Mr. Martin, put him in the car and drove him up and how they stopped in cities along the way and slept in the car unless they’d find a room in a funeral home. In Black neighborhoods, they’d find the safe places for people to stop and stay.

“The Black undertaker in town had status because white funeral homes wouldn’t bury Black people. They were prominent in the community because that’s a business that’s always needed. They’d rent out a room. The funeral home was often a big old house, and they had parlors for viewings and there’d be extra rooms in there. Or they’d know who in the neighborhood would rent out a bed.

“That’s what I’m talking about with the community. There’s a sense of community because you could not be autonomous in this country and live in a city. You had to be aware of who was around you and know how to get things done. Know where you could buy a meal. How

you would get around if you didn't have a car and couldn't ride the bus—who's the Black cab company who was going to pick you up? This is what my father grew up in.”



A photo of the Grillo family in 1947. In the middle row, from right, is Rosa's mother, Berta; second from the right is Rosa's paternal grandmother, Amparo. In the back row on the right is Rosa's father, Anival, and on the far left is her uncle, Evelio, author of *Black Cuban*, *Black American*.

Image: [Bethany Ritz](#)

What does the Museum of the American Latino mean for you and how did you work with them on inclusion and perspective?

“The most important thing for me is that the world understands that the American Latino community is as varied as the larger American community. The Museum of the American Latino worked to show the diversity of the Latino community, that there are Black Latinos. We are in there. That's why it's important to us. For two or three years there was a group, a task force, that worked with the museum to infuse a more inclusive perspective rather than a white perspective. We did focus groups that pointed out how some presentations showed European ancestry as the norm, and African, Indigenous, Asian heritage as 'other.' 'Otherism' is subtle but damaging to non-white Americans. We encouraged a peer-to-peer discussion rather than a spectator approach. Too many times, we give what's palatable to the majority instead of what's real, true.

“And we saw this same kind of thing at the National Museum of African American History and Culture—which is major for explaining Black experience and history. You know, I have stood outside that museum and seen Black Americans in wheelchairs, older folk who never

expected to see their history presented so prominently in D.C. before, and they are just proud to come. And I say, ‘Hey! Do you want me to take your picture? Give me your phone, I’ll take your picture.’

“But you can still see in places how the story is told, where it comes from the observer’s point of view, not the one who’s actually experiencing it. It’s a challenge, but we continue to work toward equity.

“And so, for two or three years, at the same time this was going on, I brought boxes of photos into the Smithsonian and they went through all my family photos and decided what they wanted to put in the exhibit. And they were introduced to other families in D.C. that could advise on capturing the history.”

How did your connection with the Smithsonian come about?

“I went to a book reading one evening. The head of the Department of Latinx Studies at the University of Maryland [[Nancy Raquel Mirabal](#)] had written a book on Afro-Cubans coming from the island to New York [[Suspect Freedoms](#)] and how they carried their political leanings as they settled into New York. I was the first to come in, so I went up and introduced myself to the author.

“She said, ‘Grillo. That’s a famous name. Are you related to Evelio Grillo?’

“And I said, ‘Yes, that’s my uncle.’

“She said, ‘Oh my God, his book has made such a difference.’

“And this little book is not a really deep study. It’s his memoir, just talking about his experiences, but nobody had recorded these experiences before. And so we got to talking and she said, ‘I’d like to interview you more on the topic.’ A public forum was arranged at a library with the help of the D.C. Afrolatino Caucus, and one of the attendees, [[Ranald Woodaman](#)], was with the [Smithsonian] Latino center, now with the Museum [of the American Latino], and he said, ‘Could we talk again? You have important history.’

“That started a three-year relationship. I would just bring in whatever I had and I would talk about the immigration of Latinos into D.C.; the mixture of African Americans and Latinos. I could name other families and I would say, ‘Let me call up so-and-so and maybe they can come in and we can talk.’ And others started bringing in their pieces.

“There are people from everywhere. When you say ‘Hispanic,’ you’re talking about the Spanish diaspora. And they [the Spanish] were the people of power. So, we don’t consider ourselves Spanish. Spanish-speaking yes, but not Spanish. I prefer Latino/Latina or Latinx, to include all the heritage that makes us. We consider ourselves a mix, and that mix is different within each Spanish-language country.

“This is how it came together. I got to be a very comfortable person for them to talk with as a resource. I could explain this perspective without barriers, and without judgment. You know, just, ‘Let me explain how life is for us.’ [I also knew] where to go in the community because my family was very active in the community.

“Ranald said, ‘There was another woman I learned of, Corina Smith, and she worked at the Dominican embassy.’ And I said, ‘Yeah, her granddaughter has a Fourth of July picnic that we all go to. You want to go?’ And Ranald walked around the picnic, and I introduced him to other families. He met Richard Washington, ‘Richard, meet Ranald, he wants to know about Latino families...’ And then Richard would give a whole different perspective, and because Richard is an amateur photographer, he had chronicled so much over the years. All the festivals. All the cultural events. Just because he enjoyed doing that.

“That’s why I enjoy community engagement so much. Just getting out and being around people. You cannot connect if you come from a place of looking out the window.”

Somos, directed by Alberto Ferreras for the National Museum of the American Latino.

Do you recall your first experience with racism?

“My first experience with racism was not the result of someone else’s action. It was me thinking that the white girls at the Catholic high school I would be attending were better than me, smarter than me, richer than me and would look down on me. What actually happened was that a nun diagnosed me as having a language barrier because I came from a Spanish-speaking household. Forget that I was English-dominant and that I earned high marks in English grammar and literature and used to diagram sentences for fun. I was one of two Latinas in my class of 100, and that nun expected less from me because of my heritage.

“Growing up Black in the U.S. is something that a Black person thinks about every day. You always know that you’re somehow different unless you stay in your bubble, unless you’re totally surrounded in your community. And even when you do that, if you’re preparing to go on to other things, you have to be groomed for that.

“On occasion, I’m mistaken for white by a white person who then says something disparaging about Black people. I’m amazed that those thoughts are so front-of-mind that a person will speak them to a stranger.

“This only happens to me in Florida. When I lived in Florida before, in Fort Lauderdale, I had dropped my daughter at school and was exploring my new neighborhood. I saw a dance and exercise studio and stopped to go in and find out about classes. I start chatting with the woman inside, finding that we both had daughters 4 or 5 years old. We talked about where we lived, and she said, ‘Oh, I live in Deerfield Beach but I’m going to move by the time my daughter becomes a teenager. We’ll move to Coral Springs before she’s dating age because I

wouldn't want her to bring a Black boy home.' Then she said, 'You wouldn't want yours to bring one home, would you?' I said to her, 'I'd actually prefer it.' And I turned around and walked out."

How has your family experience and history prepared you to embrace diversity and diverse experiences?

"I've been explaining all my life. I've been in places where Black Americans have said disparaging things about Latinos and the reverse. They feel so comfortable in identifying with me that they can do that and talk about others. I find that offensive, but yes, diversity has just been part of my life. It used to be [called] EEO awareness or cross-cultural differences. It's something that I learned to teach on a long time ago, and it's just expanded in my career and life experience.

"I think most Americans are well-meaning—that is, not meaning to offend, but just not knowing that what you just said is inappropriate. Or that biases are often unconscious. It's tiring, but I kind of believe that my assignment in this life is to do some education. Then I have to go find my own space to retreat, so I can exhale.

"My daughter went to a majority white school seventh through 12th grade and in high school there was this big discussion about the school's second floor staircase. Informally, Black kids used to hang out on the staircase between the first and second floors and the white kids were offended that the Black kids wanted to separate themselves to do that. 'Have we done anything to offend you?' they asked. 'No, just sometimes you just want to exhale and be with folks that really get you, understand you.' They had created their own affinity group. It wasn't created to exclude and offend white students, just a place to explore their own common interests. Affinity groups are important, and it's not just related to race or national origin or religion."

How do you find community here?

"I wasn't much of a joiner when I lived in other areas, because in D.C. we were part of the city, of the region. Here I found it necessary to connect to find people. ASALH is a national organization and the chapter here is the largest, or one of the largest, in the country. The advantage they have is many of the transplants here—retirees or near-retirees—are Black, well-educated and feel the mandate to get involved to improve opportunity for the community. They come from significant careers up north, so they come with the knowledge to work through many issues that the state government is throwing up. Various members have been involved throughout the community. While the NAACP is discouraging Black Americans from coming to Florida, telling folks not to spend money in Florida, ASALH is bringing their national meeting to Florida.

“Another organization that I connected to for affinity is The Howard Club. There is a huge chapter here of alums, family and people from D.C. They raise money to send students from Sarasota and Manatee counties to attend Howard University. I’m a Howard daughter. My father and several other family members are Howard grads. There is a sizable community of African Americans who are involved locally in arts and culture and philanthropy, go to school board meetings, serve in the political clubs. They’ve gotten to be activists. But not like we used to be activists—this is education, this is policy work. They are making a difference. I find that very interesting. And affirming.

“Last week I attended UnidosNow’s fundraiser concert at the Van Wezel. It was a huge celebration of culture that took me back to the summer I studied in Guadalajara as a college student—mariachis mixed with classical symphony. They were persuading concertgoers to give financial support for Latino students. My contribution will be to volunteer service.”

What would you like your white friends or acquaintances to be doing right now?

“I would like them to live as if diversity was just the norm. Just expect, consider that there is another vibration, a different vibration. [People of color] work on a couple of extra cylinders to be part of the mainstream here, but the mainstream doesn’t always know that there are others around. And it gets tiring working on these other cylinders.

“It might be impossible to do, because when you are the majority, you don’t have to think about diversity, you don’t have to think about inclusion. But those of us who are not the majority have always had to push in.”