

LUIS CORTES

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Intro by Ronit Pinto Interview by Dorri Olds

I met Luis Cortes while building movie sets. Once homeless in Central Park, the 50-year-old Cortes now works as a set dresser for films all over New York. It was his gregarious personality and love of women — “I like ‘em crazy,” he once said - that made me laugh. The more he told me of his story, the more curious I became. The conversations we had while breaking down shelving and sweeping floors revealed a vivacious demeanor, yet I knew he had a dark past.

Luis was born in the Bronx in 1963 to a psychotic mother who abused him and siblings -two sisters and a brother - with coat hangers and whatever else was in the house. He left home at the age of 11, dealt drugs as a teenager in the 80's on the lower east side where it was normal to 'pack' guns and knives. After years of being homeless, he eventually ended up squatting in the Puppet Theater in Central Park. During a few dark nights, Luis actually witnessed and stopped rapes and crimes from taking place there. They Mayor at the time, Mayor Koch, caught wind of the situation and rewarded him for his help.

While Luis's life has not by any means been easy, or normal, he has in many ways become a success. He has nine children (over three ex-wives) - his oldest son now deceased — but we would consider Luis a rebel of the gods, and by that we mean he has twisted his own fate. We asked Honeysuckle contributor Dorri Olds to sit down with him and discuss his journey.

Dorri Olds: How did you become homeless?

Luis Cortes: When I was young I ran away from an abusive home. I lived on the streets of New York — lower Manhattan and Central Park.

Were you hit as a child?

Oh yeah. My mom used to beat us with a baseball bat, with the TV wire, whatever she had in her hand.

Was she on drugs?

No. She was just psychotic [Laughs]

Do you mean literally psychotic?

Yes. That's how we looked at her. Every month she would tear the whole apartment up and my stepfather always refurnished the whole place again.

He didn't try to stop her?

There was no stopping that woman, especially because she always had a knife in her hand and was trying to destroy everything in the house.

Did your other siblings run away??

Yes. We all ran away. Not together but separately, one by one. My other sister, my mother put her in a home. In those days they used to give you electric shocks to your brain. They were doing that to her and that screwed her up.

Are you still in touch with your siblings now?

Every now and then I talk to my two sisters. My brother — we don't talk much. My brother and I had a whole lot of issues.

Where did you grow up?

Alphabet City, Avenue D. My mother still lives over there on 14th Street near Avenue B and C in the projects there.

I remember when that area was really scary.

Oh yeah. That's when I was raised there.

Did you ever speak to your mom again after you ran away?

Yeah. I call her every now and then. Once in a while I stop by and see her.

Really?

I called her when I was 36 and in Virginia. I was renovating a hotel over there. It was 2:00 in the morning. I'd had a few drinks. I said, “Yo Ma. You feel bad now after all those years?” She said, “For what?” After that she hung up the phone. Then she called my then wife and told her she was going to jump off a building. [Laughs]

Wow. She really does sound mentally ill. When you say psychotic do you mean she was out of touch with reality? Or just mean?

Mean. She came at us with a knife and if we didn't duck, oh man. We had to duck so that knife would get stuck in the wall. I have a few scars on my chin from my mother hitting me with a baseball. I assumed she was beaten as a child so that must've been why she did it. But if I asked her anything like that she would beat me some more.

continued

Why didn't you report her to your teachers?

Back then I don't think they would've cared. It's not like these days when if you call the cops on your mother they'll come and arrest her. So, when I ran away I sometimes lived in Central Park, in the bird sanctuary for a while and in the puppet house.

How did you eat?

I sold drugs. I used to watch the drug dealers and watch where they put their stash at night then I'd go and take it and resell it. They used to call me Louie the Looter. Then I ran into the supervisor in the park and he used to watch me and ask how I was doing and we got along after that. He helped me out. His name was Mack McMorris and I volunteered to clean the park so they let me live in the puppet house. They let me sleep there and all they told me was I had to keep it clean and nice and make sure you're out by morning. The homeless always slept under the canopy of the building. It was always stinking of urine. He said if you wash up and clean it I'll feed you guys. There was another guy. He used to rob the rich. He'd walk behind you and slice off your pocket with the wallet. So when you reached into your pocket you had no pocket. He used to take the money and we'd go to this rotisserie place on 50th Street near Lexington and get a few loaves of bread so we could feed the other homeless in the park.

Where do you suppose you got that kindness?

I always said I don't want to treat my kids the way my mother treated me. I had kids. I wanted to give them a better life and I have. I met a young lady in the park and Mack McMorris offered to get me into the park department. I was about to but all of a sudden they changed the rules. You had to have a driver's license but I was too young. Then I started doing construction. I met a guy with a long Greek last name, George Banagiotopless. He gave me work. He took me in as a brother because he was an only child. He was running a construction site. I was always asking him for work. Finally he said okay and we transformed a building on 13th Street into a penthouse. When we finished.

When I was 15 I got married in Delaware because they wouldn't marry me here because I was too young. I was 15 and she was 16. She didn't need parental consent but I did so my father took me to Delaware. Anyway so we lived in Delaware for a year. We had a baby, then we had a second child. Then when we got back here things didn't

work out so I just left. That's when I went to live in Central Park.

She was too jealous. I raised my children. I got myself settled. George took me to Bayview, Long Island. He showed me his house and said you can live here for free for a year, until you get yourself together. I worked with him for a long time. The parents retired and moved to Florida. He is somewhere here still. I know he owned a couple of topless joints here in Queens but I don't know the name of them. I lost track of him.

Did you ever get into drugs?

I did a Black Beauty, Quaalude, cocaine, smoked a little pot. I met Whoopie Goldberg. She used to perform in the park right in the ring. After she got famous she used to come back sometimes and say I'll never forget you She'd just come by to say hi. A guy Charlie who worked in a movie but he died from an OD. He didn't last long. Then there was another guy that used to do a Michael Jackson imitation. They called him the fireman because he could do some tricks like eating fire. We had some fun.

I remember one night in Central Park and I heard a woman screaming, "Help!" and I knew she was being raped. I was in the puppet house. I grabbed my baseball bat and ran out the door and kicked some ass. There were 15 guys in a gang group. I taught them. I left some of them on the ground with broken arms and broken legs. They got arrested. Mayor Koch thanked me and gave me a plaque as a reward. I was 18 then.

There was another robbery incident in my territory where I used to sell drugs on 5th Avenue at the pond. There was an old guy screaming for help. I was with my bag and picking up garbage. I saw this black guy and a white dude robbing an old man. So I took my baseball bat out of my bag and beat him across the legs. He fell and dropped the gun. I kicked it into the pond and went after the other guy who'd run off. That was the second time I met Mayor Koch for being a hero.

Cortes tells of a challenging childhood yet without self-pity. He laughs a lot, sounds strong, and proudly told me of the times he was honored by the City of New York for heroism. Considering where he came from, it is no small feat. We celebrate Cortes as a unique hero for the times he worked to keep Central Park safe and for the loving person he's become today. ●