

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 2

Luis Arroyo
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
February 7, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Luis Arroyo

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

SUBJECT: Life as a Latin American Immigrant in Youngstown, OH

DATE: February 7, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Luis Arroyo for the project Living and Working in Youngstown, Ohio as a Latin American Migrant for Youngstown State University. The interview is on February 7, 2019 in Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley.

BT: Hi Luis. How are you?

LA: Hi, I'm doing all right. Thank you for having me here.

BT: Yes, my pleasure. Where were you born?

LA: I was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico. My parents came here when I was two years old, and I had a brother who was one at the time.

BT: Why did your family decide to come to the United States?

LA: Because of the opportunities that come with living here in this beautiful country. My father came to work. He came with his friends to New York and they spent some time in New York. They heard that there were jobs here in Youngstown and in another community, not far from here, Lorain, Ohio, so he decided to come to work for steel companies.

BT: Could you describe the first neighborhood that you lived in (or the first that you remember)?

LA: Well, in that time, since the Puerto Ricans were living here in our city, there were not many that they accepted, so the men, first of all, lived together until they could gather enough money to send to their families. My dad did that and we were living in two or three houses. I remember when I was little, in Struthers, Ohio, we rented a house there, an apartment, and so the next house was an apartment in Smoky Hollow. After that apartment, my father bought a house in Smoky Hollow and that is where I lived my whole life.

BT: When you started school in the US, did you already know how to speak English?

LA: No, at home, only Spanish was spoken. My parents couldn't speak much English, so I started learning English by watching TV and I remember going to school at five and a half years old.

BT: Was it difficult for you to learn it?

LA: To learn English?

BT: Yes.

LA: Not so much because, although at home, only Spanish was spoken, there were opportunities in the community to learn English. Also, once I was older, about seven or eight years old, my parents needed me to translate for them. It was something that I found myself needing to do in order to help my family, so it wasn't so difficult for me.

BT: I understand. Did you feel excluded or as if you didn't belong at school, or in the community?

LA: Well yes. That always happens to immigrants, I think, because there were other communities or other people here before us, so there was something that didn't settle well with them; they believed we were competing for jobs, housing, women, for everything.

I remember when I was a kid in the second grade, I believe that during that time, it was 1956, 7, 8, around then, I remember what was happening in Cuba and seeing negative things about another community that spoke Spanish that I identified with.

BT: Did you participate in school activities?

LA: In elementary school, yes. After some time, in sixth, seventh and eighth grade, I participated in basketball and soccer, and I also sang with people from the church and helped the priest. I don't know how to say it in Spanish, but it's altar boy. I did that too.

BT: Did you feel more included in the community or in school participating in those activities?

LA: Sure I did, because by participating in those sports, all the kids and adults wanted us to win our games, and so I felt very special by helping our team and people wanted us to rise above the negativity and [do] something positive.

BT: Do you prefer to call yourself Puerto Rican, Boricua, Latino, American, or something else?

LA: I know it's changed throughout my life. First, we were Latinos, and then Hispanic Americans, and then Puerto Rican Americans, so it has changed a lot. Now, I prefer Latino.

BT: Why?

LA: Because, to me, it's something that identifies me, where I came from—and they say Latin American countries—well, I am part of North America, South America and Puerto Rico, and all of that.

BT: How do you define family?

LA: Well, when I was younger, I identified the community as family because I grew up in a house that was very religious. My father was always involved in the church. The church was tied to the Puerto Rican community, so I identified with the community in our church.

Now, this has changed. Now, I have grandchildren, I am a grandfather, and I have children. Now, my parents have died, so now my family has become a little smaller. The community is also changing because now there are a lot of people that come to Youngstown, but they are from various countries, and [they are] people that I don't know, except we have the same language, so now, my family is smaller.

BT: Describe your family.

LA: Well, I am the oldest of the seven children that my parents had. Now, only six are left. I have two sisters, no, excuse me, three sisters and I have two brothers. I have my daughter, I have a son. My wife died, and I have two grandchildren living with me. My daughter lives with me and my grandchildren, and that is my family, as it is, nuclear.

BT: What Puerto Rican traditions or celebrations did you bring to the United States?

LA: Music especially. My parents were not musicians, but we learn Puerto Rican music in the community, especially at church. I play guitar, so for many years, I was a part of a band at church, singing everything, the variety of music we have there.

BT: Anything else?

LA: What else? About the music or about—?

BT: Oh no. [Are there] any other traditions that you brought to the US?

LA: Well, the food, like always. These traditions stay with me. I cook. And the church. And I like music—playing music—speaking Spanish when I can. Sometimes, I don't have enough opportunities to keep speaking the language, because, after all, it's practicing the language. And since the community has changed so much in Youngstown, well, then, there aren't as many opportunities for that. I participate in Hispanic Awareness Week. My friend is very involved in that situation, so I participate as much as I can.

But the other traditions, like they have in Puerto Rico, I'd say for us, it's Lent, Christmas, and Three Kings' Day. I like having that, participating and teaching my grandchildren these traditions so that they can have them moving forward.

BT: When do you most use Spanish?

LA: Well, I am a counselor, so it's something that—I've always used the language, especially to help the Hispanic community—so professionally a lot of times—and when we have family gatherings, we try to use Spanish as much as we can.

BT: Do you eat more Puerto Rican or American food?

LA: Well, both. When I was younger, it was always food from Puerto Rico, although my siblings and I always say that even though Mom cooked spaghetti and meatballs, the flavor was still Puerto Rican, because they used everything they had. Nowadays, we eat Puerto Rican food at special times, during Thanksgiving and Christmas, and things like that.

BT: What is your favorite food from Puerto Rico?

LA: Ah, arroz con pollo [rice with chicken], of course. Rice with chicken, beans, and "gandules" [pigeon peas].

BT: What traditions or celebrations have changed since you've been here?

LA: Well, traditions like—the one we celebrate the most here now is Three Kings' Day. We keep up with that. I know that I try to participate in OCCHA [Organización Cívica y Cultural Hispana Americana], helping children understand the importance of Three Kings' Day, and we continue. I believe that it is the most important one because it is the only one that is different, I believe. We have Christmas and then

Three Kings' Day. When I was younger, we went to church a lot. We went there on special occasions. But now since it has changed so much with the churches here in our community, now we don't have as many opportunities. Now when there are deaths and there are wakes, this is when we see old friends, and we can sing songs, like *En mi Viejo San Juan* y all of that, so now there aren't many opportunities.

BT: What do you miss most about your country?

LA: The temperature [*laughter*]. I believe that is it. I know I suffer from asthma sometimes here because of the cold. When I've been able to go to Puerto Rico to visit, breathing doesn't bother me. Everything is fine. I say it's sad that I have a body that should be in Puerto Rico, but it is here in this cold weather.

BT: What aspects do you like most about life in the US?

LA: About life here in the US?

BT: Yes.

LA: What aspects? Well, although I did live in Puerto Rico, I was able to attend college there. When my father retired from his job, my brothers, who were younger, went to Puerto Rico and they could complete their education in Puerto Rico. Here I believe in the importance of education, because there are many people that are educated in Puerto Rico, but there are very few opportunities, because it is an island, so they come here to further their education and in the biggest country, there are many people, there are more jobs here. For me, the education that one can get here in the US is the best thing.

BT: So which aspects do you like least?

LA: I believe that—I've thought a bit about this—I've lived here sixty-seven years and to me, sometimes, what is happening now in our country with the immigrants, after all this time, it's like nothing has changed. Nothing has changed for the people of color. They always walk all over us and abuse us. I would like to live to see this change.

BT: What was your first job in the US?

LA: As a child or as an adult?

BT: Adult.

LA: As an adult?

BT: Yes.

LA: My first job, I believe as an adult—let me see—I went to school, I worked at a company, Sheet and Tube, which made steel; so working in labor, at a steel company, and studying at the same time.

BT: Did you have a job as a teenager or—?

LA: ...If I had a job as a teenager?

BT: Yes.

LA: Yes. Yes, I had various jobs. I started working at a movie theater, you know, helping there, cleaning. I believe I started that when I was thirteen or fourteen years old. In the summers, I worked on a farm. A

man came, we met with him. So, he took us to work on a local farm here. I worked in summer programs with children, as a programs director, so I had many jobs when I was younger. And papers too, newspapers. I had—I would go out to deliver papers. That was—I believe it was—maybe the first job I had, for the Vindicator.

BT: I've heard that you've worked in a steel mill. Could you tell me a little about this job?

LA: Well, that job was—we were—we had a director, and that director, depending on what the company needed or what any department needed, they sent us to help. So many times, I was cleaning hallways. The steel tube, when it went across the table, it left a lot of steel behind, and the table got dirty and they didn't work enough so when they were done using that table, they sent us to clean it with water and to pick up all of that steel and sometimes, to move tubes from one place to another.

BT: How many years did you work there?

LA: I worked at that company—I believe it was like two years before going into the army. After the army, I started again for a while but then I left that job.

BT: How did you feel when you heard about the closing of the factory?

LA: Of what? The family?

BT: The factory.

LA: How did I feel working at the factory?

BT: About the closing of the factory? Of GM?

LA: Oh, I didn't work at GM. My brother worked at GM, but I worked at a steel mill. We didn't make cars. But the job was hard, but the salary was enough that I felt independent for the first time in my life.

BT: How do you want to be remembered?

LA: Well, the first thing I want is—I've really tried to live a life helping my community, as much as I could—I worked in mental health. Nowadays, sometimes, I see a mother, father, or somebody that reminds me of when I was helping them with their children. To me, I am a mental health worker. I believe that I want to be remembered for always trying to help others with their problems as much as I can.

BT: And what do you feel most proud of?

LA: Well, I feel most proud of my family, because that is what will continue to move forward. In addition, I feel proud of how they feel about me, what I've tried to do for them. And that I am a good person, but not perfect.

BT: Well, thank you for your time. Thank you for telling me about your very interesting life.

LA: Well thank you so much for having me here and giving me this opportunity to inform you and others about my life here in the United States until today.

BT: Nice to meet you. [*They shake hands*]

LA: You too.