

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY
LVV 10

Marcela Gabriela Diaz
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
September 5, 2019

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY
LVV 10

INTERVIEWEE: Marcela Gabriela Diaz

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

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

DATE: September 5, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Marcela Gabriela Diaz for the project "Latino Voices of the Valley" for Youngstown State University. This interview has taken place on September 5, 2019 at the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Marcela, how are you?

MD: Good.

BT: Where were you born?

MD: I was born in San Fernando, Province of Buenos Aires, Republic of Argentina.

BT: Ok, how old were you when you came to the United States?

MD: Thirty-five years old.

BT: Ok, why did you decide to come to the US?

MD: My husband's job was transferred from Argentina to the United States, so we had to come, because of his job.

BT: What does your husband do?

MD: My husband is a forestry engineer.

BT: Ok. When you came to the United States, did you experience culture shock?

MD: Yes, well yes, you can say that.

BT: Could you give me an example?

MD: So, first, the main culture shock was not being able to speak English at the time, so I spent my first year [here] very isolated. I came in the winter, and for the first year, I almost didn't have any contact with Americans, except at the supermarket and sometimes with my neighbor. But anyways, it stood out to me that it was so cold that winter that I scarcely got to know my neighbors. Maybe that's the culture shock, that I feel like the people here can be cold, more standoffish than in my country.

BT: Ok. Was it difficult for you to learn English?

MD: I don't think so.

BT: No?

MD: Well, one learns with practice. I don't think so. I think English is a language that every foreigner knows a little bit of, especially Spanish speakers, because it's similar. I was able to read it and understand it, but I couldn't speak it or understand it when it was spoken.

BT: Ok. Did you understand the language?

MD: No, when someone would speak to me, no. And I didn't speak it, not even a single word.

BT: Ok. Have you visited Argentina since coming to the US?

MD: Yes, once.

BT: Once? Ok. What did you do there?

MD: I travelled. I visited my whole family.

BT: Ok. What do you like most about Argentina?

MD: Well, maybe that the people are warmer. I have the feeling that the people are friendlier there than here.

BT: Ok, let's see. Nowadays, do you prefer speaking English or Spanish?

MD: Spanish still.

BT: Spanish. Are there situations in which you prefer to speak English more than Spanish?

MD: Sometimes, when I get the impression that someone won't understand me if I speak Spanish. For example, my children came here when they were very young and sometimes they don't understand me in Spanish, so I speak to them in English. But I also want them to learn Spanish.

BT: Ok, let's see. Do you identify more with Argentine or American culture?

MD: With Argentine culture still.

BT: Why?

MD: Well, because, one example is that I can't believe people here don't know when the World Cup is. And—I don't know, just little details [like that].

BT: Are there any situations when you feel more American than Argentine?

MD: I don't think so.

BT: No?

MD: No.

BT: Not at all?

MD: Well, I've been here [just] six years and I was thirty-five when I arrived. I was already an adult and I was already set in my ways when I came. I believe that is what makes it so difficult for me to think like an American, I believe.

BT: Ok. What Argentine traditions or celebrations do you preserve and still practice here?

MD: Well, we didn't really celebrate much in Argentina either, but like I told you before, every four years, the World Cup is sacred to me. It's for one month, every four years, and that's all I think about. And it's surprising that people here didn't even know that it existed.

BT: Could you tell me about some traditions in Argentina—

MD: That aren't here?

BT: Uh huh, exactly.

MD: Something else that stood out to me is that I always imagined my children celebrating patriotic holidays in school. Patriotic holidays like Independence Day in Argentina, Tradition Day. The children dress up in typical gaucho outfits and do stuff like that. Those are things that I experienced as a child when I was in school, but that my children will never experience.

BT: Ok, let's see. What traditions did your parents practice that you don't now?

MD: I can't think of any right now. My parents weren't big on tradition, I don't think. It's not very different here.

BT: Ok. And what traditions did you practice that your children don't?

MD: Well, remembering patriotic holidays from my country. I think that's it. My children don't know when it's the Independence Day of Argentina. They don't know how to sing the national anthem of Argentina. They identify with the American flag, and things like that. Things that I remember from school, essentially.

BT: Ok. What do you think about those changes?

MD: Sometimes, it makes me sad, but I also don't think it's a bad thing, it's just different. It's another way of seeing it, that's all.

BT: Is there a tradition that your children practice that you really like?

MD: Well, Halloween seems fun to me.

BT: Halloween?

MD: In Argentina, there's no such thing as Halloween.

BT: Is there a similar tradition?

MD: No.

BT: No?

MD: We don't have it. It just seems fun to dress up and go around the neighborhood dressed up. And I always go with my children when they want to do it. Yes.

BT: Ok, ok. Do you still eat Argentine food now that you live in the United States?

MD: No, I can't find the ingredients. I have to buy them on the internet, and I'm not a really good cook, so no, there are things that I don't eat anymore.

BT: Oh, wow. Let's see. Do your children speak Spanish at home?

MD: No.

BT: No?

MD: I make them, but they don't pay attention to me. They understand everything I say, but they answer me in English. Sometimes, I'm strict and I say: "I don't understand you and if you don't say it to me in Spanish, I won't give it to you." But that's only sometimes, not all the time. My husband is German, so my husband wants them to speak in German. And I want them to speak in Spanish. So they rebel and speak in English.

BT: Wow. Do you sometimes wish it were different?

MD: Yes, I would like them to speak more Spanish.

BT: Ok, let's see. Since living in the United States, do you think you've lost part of your Argentine identity?

MD: No.

BT: No, not at all?

MD: No. It's different today than when my great grandparents came to America from Europe, because now I have Internet and with social media, I am informed about everything that happens in my country, about my family. I don't feel like I cut ties and became another person. I'm still the same, I believe.

BT: Ok. What do you miss most about Argentina?

MD: About Argentina, maybe my family.

BT: Your family?

MD: Uh huh.

BT: Is there a tradition [that you miss]?

MD: No, a family tradition, no. The traditions in December, Christmas, New Year's, things like that. In Argentina, Christmas is in the summer, it's very hot. The Christmas tradition is gathering with family and eating on the sidewalk, you know, because it's hot, and everyone eats on the street. And sometimes, they start dancing in the street. Here, it's super cold, and I hardly know my neighbors.

BT: Ok. What are some typical foods from Argentina?

MD: Well, empanadas. Here, there isn't dulce de batata [sweet potato dessert]. And another typical food, the most common in Argentina is el asado [barbecue], which is meat, like beef, which doesn't taste the same here.

BT: Ok, what is your favorite dish from Argentina?

MD: My favorite dish from Argentina is empanadas.

BT: Empanadas? Yeah, they are really delicious.

MD: Yeah.

BT: Ok, what does family mean to you?

MD: It's the foundation. It's the foundation where one stands.

BT: Ok. What was your first job in the United States?

MD: My first job, I started working in a business that did inventory. They took us—the employees to different stores and, with a little machine, we would count the items there. We would take inventory when I was working there.

BT: Ok, did you like the job?

MD: I took it because it was easy and I didn't speak much English.

BT: Ok.

MD: I basically did it for that reason. My first year [here], I didn't get out much because I had a little baby, and I didn't like the idea of leaving my baby in daycare. Imagine how difficult it is leaving your child at daycare and speaking the language with the caretaker. To me, it was hard leaving my child and not knowing what's going on. So, the first year, I didn't really leave [my house] much and—oh, I forgot the question. What was the question?

BT: Oh wow [laughter]

MD: [laughter]

BT: Oh, did you like the job?

MD: Ah yes, I liked it. And so, at first I didn't do anything, and then I forced myself to work in order to have more interaction with Americans to be able to speak [English]. That was what I was going to say, that at first, I didn't go out much; since I was at home all day, I wasn't learning any English. So, I looked for an easy job so I could interact with more people here.

BT: So how did you learn English?

MD: Well, because of that, working, and I also took a course at the English Center here in Youngstown.

BT: Ok. Why did you decide to become an instructor?

MD: No—well, I am always looking for a new and better job. And to be honest, I didn't study to become an instructor, but for this position, they needed someone with a college degree in any area. I actually have a degree in Information Systems. I was a computer programmer in Argentina, but I didn't work much, and I decided on this job because well, it's something I can do and it seems... well, so far I really like teaching Spanish.

BT: How many years have you been teaching?

MD: Two weeks.

BT: Wow! So, wow—

MD: Ok, in Argentina, I taught, yes, but this job, I started it in August. A year ago, for one year, I worked as an educational assistant in an elementary school. I helped Hispanic children understand what was going on in class. That was my previous job; it was very important. My previous job is what sparked my interest in teaching.

BT: Ok.

MD: And now, I have been working here [at YSU] for two or three weeks, since August 19.

BT: Wow!

MD: *[laughter]*

BT: Do you like the job?

MD: Yes, so far, yes. For three weeks, it's been fine.

BT: What's your favorite part about this job?

MD: My favorite part about this job is that I have to speak Spanish and I know how to do that *[laughter]*. Yes, it's a relief. After six years, when all the time you are thinking that you have to say something in English and that you aren't saying it right, it's like I feel free. I say, wow, this is something I do well because I speak this language well. That's what I like the most.

BT: Ok. What level do you teach?

MD: Level one.

BT: One, ok, let's see. Could you describe some of the differences between the universities in Argentina and in the United States?

MD: *[Nods]* Well, I'm sure I'll notice more differences as time goes by. But right now, I notice that in Argentina, you pick a major as soon as you enroll in the university. Here, you have two years to try out different things and after that, you pick your major. In Argentina, the day that you look, well, here's this major and that major—the same day you enroll, you say, "One day, I'm going to do this." It's faster that way.

BT: Ok. Are the classes different?

MD: The classes, umm—when I was in college, we didn't have as much technology. When I studied, we had—there were five hundred students in my first math class, for example. We had a huge classroom, with two large sliding chalkboards that went up and down. And so, that's what I remember about my college years. Here I have a small classroom with twenty students and that's it. And I went to classes with five hundred people.

BT: Wow.

MD: Yeah.

BT: Was it difficult to learn in that environment?

MD: No, I suppose that if one studies, one can learn in any environment. Well, that's the thing. In Argentina, college is free; that's an important point. So, there can be five hundred people there. Everyone can study, but not everyone finishes. I believe at the end of the first year, half had decided they weren't going to study anymore. But at least, it's free, and everyone tries it out.

BT: Ok. I have another question. You told me that in Argentina, you must choose a major immediately.

MD: Yes.

BT: So, in the first two years, are there General Education classes, such as writing and basic math, or is it that you start college taking classes just in your major and that's it?

MD: You go to school focused on just your major and that's it. And your major may include subjects like—for example, I studied computer science, right? And the first year, I had a lot of math and a little English. The English classes were for translating texts. That is all the English I had. It could be said that these subjects are shared amongst other majors, but it is part of your education plan so that some day, you can be what you chose to be.

BT: Ok, because here, when you start college you have to take General Education classes. Everyone has to take communications, or writing, so that is why I asked.

MD: It's the foundation.

BT: What are you most proud of?

MD: Proud?

BT: Mm.

MD: Today—well, today, I am proud to have left my house and started working in order to be able to teach Spanish today. And I also feel proud to have studied. When I was studying, I had a lot of problems, but I feel proud of achieving it. I don't know, I am proud of my children, they are doing very well, and my husband too, who is also doing very well. Basically that.

BT: Ok. One more question. When did you feel most comfortable speaking English?

MD: When was I most comfortable?

BT: Yeah.

MD: Well, as each day passes, I am feeling more comfortable over time. And possibly, right now, I feel a little more comfortable, when I learn more.

BT: Ok, that's all. Thank you for your time and thank you for helping me with this project.

MD: So what will you do with all of this?

BT: Well, I have to translate and transcribe the interviews.

MD: Ok.