

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 11

Ana Torres
Interview
By
Lindsey Chludzinski
On
September 9, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Ana Torres

INTERVIEWER: Lindsey Chludzinski

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

DATE: September 9, 2019

LC: This is an interview with Ana Torres for the project Latino Voices of the Valley for Youngstown State University. The interview is on September 9th, 2019 at the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Lindsey Chludzinski. Hello, Mrs. Torres. How are you?

AT: How are you Lindsey?

LC: I'm well, thank you. Where were you born?

AT: I was born in Peru, in South America.

LC: Very well. Describe your childhood.

AT: I was born in a little town in the north of Peru, on the border with Ecuador, so I had family in Ecuador and Peru. And ever since I was little, we would travel to Ecuador and also travel around Peru with my family. My father liked to travel and for us to get to know all of Peru, the good things and the bad things. We were five kids, and I was the only girl. Four brothers, and I was the fourth [child]. And it was a happy childhood, with problems like any [other] family. We had difficult times because there were times when we did not have a democratic government. We had military regimes. I experienced that when I was very young and ever since I remember, we endured difficult times because one of those regimes took away land from landowners. In this case, in the northern part of Peru, where my grandparents (on both sides) and I were from, they [the government] took away their land and they were left without anything. So it was difficult to see them suffer because of that, because they had worked their whole lives in order to be able to have those lands. At any rate, things were changing and improving and when my older brothers finished high school and they began their university studies, we all moved to Lima because they went there to study. And as is typical in Latino families, especially at that time and even still today, parents continue helping out their children until they finish their university studies.

LC: Thank you. When you were younger, how did you imagine your life in the future?

AT: [*Laughter*] I'm laughing because I always told my dad that I was not going to marry young, that I was going to explore the world and study and then I would have a family. But that is not how it turned out, it was the opposite. I married very young and had my sons, my two sons, young. I do not regret it at all. I love it because now I am the mom of two sons, almost thirty years old and twenty-seven years old. And I just turned fifty-one years old, so I feel very young and enjoy my life. And they were able to enjoy a mom that was very young and was able to be more active with them. And even today we do things together and sometimes they see me more like a friend, right? that can do things, various things, with them, whether it be dancing or traveling or other things.

LC: Good. What are your sons' names?

AT: My older son is named Felipe and my younger son is named Andrés. They have two last names, the last name of their father, which is Morales, and mine, because that is a Latino tradition. So, their last name is Morales and we put a hyphen, so it is Morales-Torres, so that here they wouldn't separate the last names and would use them together. They do not have a middle name. Their names are Felipe Morales-Torres and Andrés Morales-Torres.

LC: Thank you. At what age did you immigrate to the United States?

AT: I immigrated to the United States when I finished high school. I finished high school in Peru in December, because the semesters are different, in December of eighty-five. I came to study, first in a high school in New Jersey, in one of the suburbs where I had cousins, to practice my English while applying to universities here [in the States]. So I began the school year in eighty-six, as my (student) immigration documents were being processed. So I came in eighty-six to study in a high school and then I was there for several months until... I believe it was until April or May, April. I returned to Peru to process my transfer as a university student to the University of Miami, in Florida.

LC: Very good. When you arrived in the United States, did you experience any culture shock?

AT: Yes. First of all, when I arrived at the high school in New Jersey, I clearly remember the first day of classes, especially since I had just come from having studied in a private, all-girls Catholic school. So, it was a big difference, even if I had been in Peru, right?, it wasn't a co-ed high school [in Peru]. So when I came to the public high school in New Jersey, it was a shock. From the way the students dressed compared to how I dressed. But the first shock was when the

teacher entered my first class and I stood up, because we had the custom that when the professor entered the class, we stood up. But I was the only one that was standing up, so then I played dumb because I realized that no one else was standing up. Or the boys... I saw that they didn't have as much respect for the teacher, right? The teacher would be talking and they would be talking to each other on the side... and some girls would be painting their nails, and I was horrified, right? And then I also remember a guy that would always look at me and look at me, but he was looking at me like he was observing me. And I said, "What are you looking at?" Then he said to me, "It's just that I don't understand. You don't look like I thought people from Peru would look like." And I said, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "Where are your feathers?" And I [responded], "Feathers?" So he said to me, "Yes, when I saw an article in National Geographic, all of them had a thing here [*pointing to the head*] with feathers." So the article was about Amazon tribes. And I said, "Oh, my God." I couldn't believe it, and I said, "Uhh... [*laughter*] we are civilized people. And where we live, much like here in the United States, there are obviously more remote places, such as the Amazon or places in the Andes, where their clothes and costumes are different." But I laughed a lot at that and he learned a lot, right? So this was one of the first stereotypes that I encountered.

LC: Good, thank you. What was your first job in the United States?

AT: My first job? Well, when I came, it wasn't an official job, but I first started out helping take care of kids when I was in New Jersey. It helped me out a lot to practice my English with the children. But, later in Florida, when I started out as a student, I worked as a student assistant at the university, as an international student. And later, when I already had my sons, I started to work. First, I worked in a store, Bloomingdales, but later I started to work with companies, doing translations. I worked first for a corporation that did sales in Central America, so I translated many documents.

LC: Very well. What difficulties did you encounter in your jobs?

AT: I did not encounter difficulties because I have always liked to be very responsible and to learn. Moreover, after that job that I told you about in which I did translations, after three months working there, I got a job at a very big private Catholic school in Miami. I started out there working as a receptionist/secretary, but since I always liked learning, one of my bosses recognized this and gave me the opportunity to learn other things. And so, in a short matter of time, I attained positions with a lot of responsibility, despite not having my degree yet because

I started my family at a young age and I had not yet finished my studies at the university. And later, I started up at the university again and I took up my studies again when my sons were little. And then I got a financial administration position and I was in charge of what was a very large school with six buildings, which was next to the bay of Key Biscayne. And I never had any problems, thank God, never.

LC: Very well. When and why did you decide to move to Youngstown?

AT: To Youngstown, from Florida to Youngstown. I remarried and I came here because my husband was from this region. I came here with my sons and one was already starting high school and the other was beginning sixth grade. So they did some of their schooling here in Ohio.

LC: Very good. What was your first impression of the city?

AT: I liked it a lot because obviously it was smaller than Miami. So it seemed to me that it was a better environment for my sons to go to school, to raise a family. It reminded me of where I was born. Smaller, more family-oriented, a greater sense of community. Something that I have always praised and that I have observed about Youngstown is that feeling of community, that, despite it being a more individualistic culture than the Latino culture, there is that sense of helping out others, helping neighbors, if someone needs something, then immediately they raise funds or [host] a dinner in order to fundraise, or help families or people that are in need. And there are also many people who do volunteer work, which is something that I didn't see much of in Miami. And I like that very much.

And well, at the beginning, I was shocked, of course, because I was used to more people speaking Spanish in Miami, but here there weren't so many. Until one day, I was in a store and I heard someone speaking Spanish and I said "Oh!" and I was very excited. Later I began to look into it and yes, in fact there were more people that spoke Spanish [here].

LC: Very well. Do you identify more with Peruvian or American culture?

AT: Both. Because obviously I was born and grew up in Peru and Peru is always in my heart, but the United States is my home, it is where I have lived most of my life and I love the United States. So I identify with both.

LC: Very well. What Peruvian traditions and celebrations do you preserve and still practice here?

AT: We celebrate, we get together here in Youngstown. There is a big group of Peruvians. More or less, I don't know, I would guess we have some forty or fifty Peruvians. And every year we

get together and we celebrate the Independence of Peru with traditional food. I love Peruvian food so I cook it, I try to cook it, not always because I am always very busy, but I try, once in a while, to cook certain Peruvian dishes. I have also tried to teach my sons. They love Peruvian food as well. Like me, they have changed certain traditional dishes. We have adapted them in a way, fused them, you could say, with the American culture. I try to bring certain products and I make them. So customs are, for me, through food more than anything, and music.

And well, I am always in contact with my brothers. My two older brothers live in Peru, in Lima, and my nephews and niece live in Lima. I have a brother who lives in Miami. He is married as well and has two twin sons and we are always in touch. And my mom, my mom is eighty-seven years old and she lives with my husband and I here in Youngstown. So, she [my mom] won't let me forget [Peru]... [laughter] I cannot forget it.

LC: Perfect. I have heard that you participate in Organización Cívica y Cultural Hispana Americana (OCCHA). Would you be able to tell me about some of the activities of the organization?

AT: Yes, OCCHA, which is the acronym for the organization, their mission is primarily to support Hispanic culture, as well as all the various people that form part of the diversity of Youngstown. So, for example, one of the things that we do every year is around Three Kings' Day, which is in January. We distribute... we have an activity in which we have food and we distribute presents to the children, so it is something that I love that we do every year. Also, we have various educational and health programs. We also have a food festival that I have participated in for eight years. And so, various activities. Now, in the month of October, during Hispanic Heritage Month, we have a session/seminar on cancer prevention. And we make it bilingual, for the people who do not understand English and also for those who only understand English.

LC: Very well. Do you participate in other organizations as well?

AT: Yes, well, at the university, Dr. Prieto and I are part of the student organization of Latino students, so we advise that organization. I am also the board president of a local foundation that has been around for many years, which is called the International Institute. Over the years, it has helped people who are immigrants that have moved here, of different nationalities, so that they can adjust to their new life. So we give different grants, we give money to different organizations that apply. I am also in charge of this organization, I help out with this organization. I am also

part of an organization that is a Women's Club at the university. I was the president for two years. I help with various things.

LC: Very well. If you could change one thing in your life, what would you change?

AT: I don't believe that I would change anything, because, although at times I wish that certain things hadn't happened, I believe that all the experiences in our lives, whether good or bad, positive or negative, they teach us to be the people we are today, and they make us stronger, and we can share those experiences with others.

LC: What does success mean to you?

AT: For me, success is not only to be satisfied with the goals that you have accomplished in your life, but also to be able to adjust to what you had to change. As much as you strive for certain goals, sometimes things come up in life that make you change your path. So, success is knowing how to follow that path, but also how to adjust yourself, and above all make an impact on where you live and on the people you live with. Because success for me is not only personal, it is seeing that my family is well, it's seeing that my sons are doing well, that they are succeeding, that they are accomplishing their goals, and also my students and the community that I live in.

LC: Do you have anything else that you would like to share?

TORRE: I love that you are doing these interviews with various people like us that have moved here, that have left our countries behind, our communities, the things that were familiar to us, because it helps eliminate those barriers, those stereotypes about who we immigrants are.

Because we immigrants aren't coming to take anything away from anyone; instead, we come here to help and to join this new community, which we form part of. Because, in my case, I came to study, I came from Peru, in a difficult time period, when in Peru we were experiencing a lot of terrorism. And so I appreciate it a lot, right? So as immigrants, we appreciate it. The majority of us want to give all that energy, that good vibe that we feel and help out where we have moved to, the new community that we are a part of. So, I love that you are doing these interviews and helping to spread this message. Thanks.

LC: Thank you very much. That is all for now.

AT: Thank you.