

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 12

Herminia Lees
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
September 14, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Herminia Lees

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

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

DATE: September 14, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Herminia Lees for the project “Latino Voices of the Valley” for Youngstown State University. The interview is on September 14, 2019 at the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Herminia, how are you?

HL: Great, thank you, and you?

BT: I’m great, thank God. Where were you born?

HL: In Chiclayo, Peru. In Peru.

BT: Ok. How old were you when you came to the United States?

HL: I came to get married, for marriage.¹

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

HL: Yes, I missed my family. I didn’t like the snow. It wasn’t as easy to get around, like it is in Peru, [with the] bus. It was a huge shock.

BT: And with the language?

HL: That too, but I knew some English.

BT: Ok, and how did you learn English?

HL: I learned English—my husband is American, and he spoke English. I learned by reading children’s books. And then, I worked as a teacher’s assistant in an elementary school. I learned a lot of English there. The children taught me.

BT: Ok. Have you visited Peru since you came to the United States?

HL: Yes. Every year I visit—a month of vacation.

BT: And what do you usually do when you go there?

HL: I visit my friends and family—and I cook everyday. That’s how I spend my time.

¹ She was 28 years old when she came to the US.

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

HL: Seeing my family, speaking the language, that more than anything, and my friends, cooking whatever I want— I love the fruit that can't be found here.

BT: Do you have a favorite place in Peru?

HL: The market. The market—the people go to the market everyday there; here, people go once a month, once-twice a month. There, everyday, you grab your bag and you go to the market and buy [groceries] for the day. That's what I like.

BT: Ok, and why?

HL: Because [the food] is fresh.

BT: Ok, I understand. Which Peruvian traditions or celebrations do you preserve and still practice here?

HL: Here, I celebrate the Independence Day of Peru. I invite all the Peruvians and all their friends to my house—sometimes, eighty-ninety people show up.

BT: Wow!

HL: Mm. Everyone brings typical dishes from their country, and I have a lot. It's a tradition now. Chileans bring typical dishes [from their country]—Puerto Ricans. There are people from many countries: Chileans, Puerto Ricans—

BT: So, you aren't the only one that cooks?

HL: No, I only clean my house, I set out chairs and tables, and the rest, they bring.

BT: Ok.

HL: No, I'm not cooking for so many people, eighty, no.

BT: Ok [*Smiles*].

HL: Perhaps a huge table. I have tons of pictures. I can provide you with some pictures if you're going to be...

BT: Ok.

HL: Yeah. I can.

BT: Let's see. What traditions did you parents practice that you don't now?

HL: Traditions, the same ones. Parades, church, processions, each saint has a month, they do processions, yes.

BT: Ok, do you have children?

HL: Yes, I have two daughters.

BT: What tradition do you practice that you daughters do not?

HL: What my daughters don't practice?

BT: Mm.

HL: My daughters speak Spanish. I made them speak Spanish when they were younger. But they don't instill that in their children; they don't teach it to their children. It's their problem, you know? That's all.

BT: Ok.

HL: Language is the most important.

BT: Ok. Let's see. What do you think about these changes?

HL: What?

BT: What do you think about these changes—changes in your children's traditions?

HL: I like living here, because in Peru, I was very poor. I came here, I continued studying. I had a good job as a teacher. I had a lot of money. For me, it was a lot, because there I barely had enough to eat. Now, I buy the car of the year, so yeah.

BT: Ok. Do your children practice traditions or celebrations from this country that you really like?

HL: With my children, we celebrate Christmas. We gather at my house. Thanksgiving, we celebrate at one of my children's houses. And Easter, in the other [child's] house. So we take turns. And we always invite those that don't have families... those who are alone.

BT: What's your favorite Peruvian dish?

HL: Rice, prepared any way. But I can't eat rice here because my husband is American and he doesn't like it. I learned to eat potatoes, but when I make rice, I eat a lot of it.

BT: Ok. Do you still eat Peruvian food?

HL: Very little. Not so much.

BT: Ok.

HL: Because [making] Peruvian food is very hard work, tedious, and my husband doesn't like it, he doesn't know what he's eating. American is better.

BT: [Nods] Do your children know how to cook Peruvian food?

HL: One of them, yes. The older one.

BT: Do you identify more with Peruvian or American culture?

HL: That's a tough question because I've been here for a long time now, about fifty years. But I'd say it's fifty-fifty.

BT: Ok. Why?

HL: Because I go to Peru. I speak Spanish. But American culture is better because women have more rights here—they are taken into consideration. In Peru, women aren't really taken into consideration.

BT: Ok.

HL: Hopefully that's the answer [you were looking for].

BT: What rights do you have here that you don't in Peru?

HL: My husband—he trusts me a good deal, and I trust him too. Rights—

BT: It's more about how men treat women?

HL: Yes, the men are male chauvinists. Here, no.

BT: I understand. Do you feel you've lost part of your Peruvian identity living in the United States?

HL: I believe so.

BT: Yeah? In what way?

HL: Because when I go to Peru, the people know that I'm not one of them because of the way I talk, the way I dress. I believe I have lost some of it because the people there are very poor. When they shop, they ask for discounts in Peru; I don't ask for discounts in Peru, I pay and that's it.

BT: Ok. That's it?

HL: Mm, that's it.

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

HL: What I miss most about Peru [is] my family, the fruit—like I said, the food, typical food. In Peru, I'd like to have a car to go where I want, but I can't. First of all, I have no car there. Second of all, my brothers don't let me go out alone, they take care of me. Here no, here I'm free. I go out and that's all.

BT: I understand. Are there any traditions you miss?

HL: I've been here a long time. It's been a long time.

BT: Ok. You were a teacher, right?

HL: Yes.

BT: How many years did you teach?

HL: How many years did I work here?

BT: Yeah.

HL: Thirty-six years.

BT: Thirty-six years, ok. What was your favorite part of this job?

HL: Talking to the students, dressing nice. I loved when I could take control of the students and get them to really listen to me. It's the main part of the—because I worked at a city school, and it's hard. That's all.

BT: Ok. What difficulties did you face in this job?

HL: The language.

BT: That's it?

HL: The language. There were always racist students. They would say to me, "Hey Lees, go back to Peru!"

BT: Wow.

HL: And I would say, "Go back to Africa."

BT: Wow, wow.

HL: They are racists, right?

BT: Yes, I understand. What does education mean to you?

HL: Ooooh. Education is learning manners, which parents should start [to teach], right? Respect, love, love of animals, and knowing how to apply what one learns as much as possible.

BT: What are some differences between universities here and universities in Peru?

HL: Ohhh. Here, it's very easy to get into college, but to stay in college is the difficult part, because you have to pay and get good grades. However, in Peru, it's very difficult to get into college because—two thousand students apply, but there are only seventy seats available. It's almost impossible to get into a state school. But once you're accepted, it's easy. Everything is cheap. They even give you food, books, everything is free. But it's hard to get in.

BT: They only accept seventy people?

HL: Seventy, yes.

BT: Wow! That's very few people.

HL: Very few, for so many [applicants]. There are private universities—but another thing is that it takes a long time because students are always on strike. They are the first ones to protest on strike. It takes a really long time [to get a degree].

BT: Ok. Could you tell me about more experiences of discrimination that you've experienced in the United States?

HL: When I arrived here, I didn't have a car and I didn't know how to drive. So, I went to take the written driver's test and I didn't pass. I went again and I didn't pass. Like six times, I didn't [pass]—[but] finally I passed. Then, my husband tried to teach me how to drive. I tried and tried, and I didn't pass. It took four years to be able to pass the driving exam. Once [it was done], I was happy, but four years was a long time.

My husband didn't want me to buy a car. One winter day, I had already been working as a teacher's assistant in an elementary school. I started to earn [money]—I had—I was offered a loan to buy a car. One day, I got annoyed and I walked in ten-degree weather to where they sold cars and bought a car.

BT: [laughter]

HL: My husband was upset. My husband grabbed his things and went to his mother's house, mad. After four years, I bought another car and he did the same thing. Five years later, I bought another car, but before buying it, I said, "You'd better start packing, because I'm going to buy another car." He tells me, "This time, you're going to leave, fool!" *[laughter]*

BT: *[laughter]*

HL: No, but he doesn't like spending money.

BT: Ok.

HL: So I go quietly and buy a car or whatever I want it.

BT: *[laughter]*

HL: But afterwards, he likes it. After the anger has passed, he's happy.

BT: Wow.

HL: It's just when I want [something], I get it. It's my money.

BT: Well, yes. Wow, three cars?

HL: More than three cars, I bought cars every four years.

BT: *[laughter]*

HL: But I sell them. I give them to him. Anything else?

BT: How'd you meet your husband?

HL: Before, there wasn't Facebook. There was only pen pals. Do know what pen pals are?

BT: Yes.

HL: I had many friends [that] I saw in Peru. I had friends from Chile, from the US. That's how I got to know my husband, until he came to Peru. He went to where I was studying, at the University of Peru. And one of my teachers, a priest, told him, "Let's go, I'll bring you to another city, Talara." There were English priests there. So the priest told him, "Tell him to marry the Angulo girl (me, Herminia) because she is intelligent and a good person." That's why he married me.

BT: That's it?

HL: Nothing else.

BT: Ok. Since you have retired, what do you do in your free time?

HL: I watch TV. I go to the movies. I shop at second-hand stores because when I go to Peru, I bring presents, used clothes. And I also volunteer at a clothing store for two hours a week.

BT: Ok, what are you most proud of?

HL: Of my pension. That's it.

BT: Ok. Well, that's all. Thank you for your time. Thank you for doing this interview with me.

HL: Whatever you need, I will be more than happy to help.

BT: Thank you so much.