

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 15

Armando Labra
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
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INTERVIEWEE: Armando Labra

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

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

DATE: October 26, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Armando Labra for the project “Latino Voices of the Valley” for Youngstown State University. The interview is on October 26, 2019 at the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Armando, how are you?

AL: Great. I’m good, Brea. Thank you for inviting me.

BT: Yeah, my pleasure. So, where were you born?

AL: In San Luis Potosi, Mexico.

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

AL: I was seventeen years old.

BT: Seventeen, ok. Why did you decide to come to the United States?

AL: Because of economic issues mostly.

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

AL: Well, yes, because everything is in another language. [There are] other customs. Yes, [I had] some culture shock.

BT: So, when you came here, you didn’t know how to speak English?

AL: No, I knew a little because I had studied it in high school, but it was very basic.

BT: Mm.

AL: I learned it here.

BT: And how did you learn it?

AL: At first, television helped me a lot. I used to watch TV—and living with people here, locally, well, you learn.

BT: Of course.

AL: But [basically], studying some, watching TV, all of that helped me.

BT: Ok. Was it hard to learn it?

AL: The first two years [were] a little difficult.

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

AL: Yes, I've gone a lot, I go one, two, three times a year.

BT: Ok. When was the last time you visited?

AL: The last time I visited was in the month of August [and] I came back. I spent three months there.

BT: Ok, what did you do?

AL: Well, I was there with my parents, helping them in the house and everything.

BT: And do you usually do that when you visit Mexico?

AL: When I visit, well, I try to spend my time helping out with what needs to be done around the house, etcetera.

BT: Ok, what do you like most about Mexico?

AL: What I like most is the richness of its culture. I like the hospitality of the people, and I like that it has a lot of traditions.

BT: Ok. Could you tell me about some of the differences between the United States and Mexico?

AL: Differences in what context?

BT: In general.

AL: In general, umm, in comparison to here, where I live, for example, in Ohio, compared to San Luis Postosi, the weather change is very extreme. For example, there, winter isn't so cold [and] it's short. And so, it's a big difference. Right now, for example, in the fall, it's so beautiful because the leaves on the trees change colors and the parks are beautiful. And that is something people don't see [in Mexico], because where I'm from, it's more or less desert-like. So, it's a completely different environment.

BT: Ok. Do you prefer to speak English or Spanish now?

AL: I'd rather speak—it depends on—if I am in San Luis, in Mexico, I always prefer to speak Spanish because it doesn't seem right to speak English to them, when in reality, my native language is Spanish. On the other hand, being here, I prefer to speak English if the person is not Latino, but if they are, I always prefer to speak to them in Spanish.

BT: Ok, so do you feel more comfortable speaking English or Spanish?

AL: I definitely always feel more comfortable speaking Spanish.

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

AL: Ok, look. Like, for example, next month we have the Day of the Dead. It's a tradition that we've carried on for many years in my home, for example, and every year we celebrate it. We put up an altar with offerings and all that is associated with the Day of the Dead.

BT: What traditions did your parents practice that you don't anymore?

AL: For example, many of the Catholic church traditions, the ones celebrating the saints and all of that. Those are things I really don't practice.

BT: Ok. Do you have children?

AL: Yes, I have five children.

BT: Five, ok.

AL: Five boys.

BT: Wow, ok. What traditions did you practice that your children don't?

AL: Well, I think my children are just learning to carry on these traditions. They still don't practice them because they are relatively young. And I hope they continue these traditions, like, for example, the Day of the Dead. We gather at my house and we do the offerings and all that. So, I hope that one day, they'll do the same. But being that they are young right now, they don't have much interest in these traditions.

BT: Ok, I understand. How do you feel about those changes?

AL: Well, because of those changes, everything has evolved, and some things are lost along the way, but one acquires additional traditions that maybe aren't ours, but maybe it's a mixture of cultures.

BT: Mhm, ok. Do your children practice any traditions from this country that you really like?

AL: From here [in] the United States, or Mexico?

BT: United States.

AL: Ah, traditions—nothing comes to mind. No, nothing really.

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

AL: Yes, a lot.

BT: And what is your favorite Mexican dish?

AL: Ah, Chiles Rellenos (stuffed peppers)

BT: Ok.

AL: Chiles rellenos with rice and beans. I go to the restaurant and every week, they tell me, "No"—they already know what I'm going to order [*laughter*]

BT: [*laughter*]

AL: ...because it's the most... I like it a lot.

BT: Ok. Do you have a restaurant that you would recommend to me?

AL: Ah, yes. I'm going to recommend the restaurant "Tequila Jalisco" in Canfield.

BT: Ok.

AL: The guys, the owners are excellent. The restaurant is excellent. Excellent food, excellent service, and once you go, you won't want to go anywhere else, because it a great combination of everything, and everything is so well made.

BT: Ok, what's it called again?

AL: Tequila Jalisco.

BT: Ok, Tequila Jalisco, ok.

AL: Yes, it's in the middle of Canfield. It's... I'll say it this way, if you get off of [route] 11 and you go as if you're headed to the [Canfield] fair, it's on the left-hand side, on 224... no, on the right-hand side.

BT: Ok.

AL: You won't be disappointed [*laughter*].

BT: [*laughter*]. Ok. Do you know how to cook Mexican food?

AL: Yes.

BT: Do your children also know how to cook [it]—

AL: Yes, mostly the younger ones. I'm always teaching them, and they do it very well, especially the youngest. He's the one that is most interested. He brings out the food and you see it and it's like... wow, it surprises me how well he does it.

BT: So he likes to cook?

AL: Yes, he loves it.

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

AL: Well, with both, but with—more with Mexican [culture], of course.

BT: Why?

AL: Well, I don't know. Maybe it's because it's where I was born, it's where I come from, you know, where I'm from. But like I said, I've adopted other traditions.

BT: Ok. When do you feel more American than Mexican?

AL: When do I feel more American than Mexican? I don't know, I don't know in which instance—well, something I've learned that I like about the culture is, for example, punctuality. Because in Mexico, the thing is some people still don't understand that punctuality is important. And here, people are always more punctual. I feel more punctual now than before.

BT: Ok.

AL: I don't know. [It was] something to share. [*laughter*]

BT: Ok. Do you believe you've lost part of your Mexican identity living in the United States?

AL: No, not really.

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

AL: The food.

BT: The food?

AL: Yes, because even though I can still get all of the ingredients to make the food here, sometimes there are dishes that you like that you can't make as well here as they make them over there [in Mexico].

BT: Ok.

AL: Yeah.

BT: What do you most appreciate about the United States?

AL: It's easier to live.

BT: In what way?

AL: Economically, at least. You live more comfortably, relative to how much you make and how much you spend. It's a lot better.

BT: Ok, and what do you like least about the United States?

AL: Everything is politicized: racial issues, racial conflicts, the social injustice toward minorities. It's a shame. It doesn't make me feel so good.

BT: You work for GM, right?

AL: Yes.

BT: Ok, could you describe a typical day at work?

AL: I drove a forklift at General Motors. A typical day—well it's moving materials from one place to another, supplying materials to the operators on the assembly [line] so that they can work.

BT: Ok. What challenges do you face at work?

AL: Umm, challenges, well, just the normal challenges that we all have at work, you know?

BT: Ok. Could you tell me something rewarding about your job?

AL: It allows me to live a nice lifestyle.

BT: Ok.

AL: And [it's] rewarding because we make a good product.

BT: Ok. And what do you mean by a good lifestyle?

AL: Economically comfortable.

BT: Ok. I understand. How did you feel when they closed some GM factories this year?

AL: For example, I work here in Lordstown, which is one of the plants that closed—well, it's devastating. Devastating for the community, devastating for the families that had to move to other states, some [workers] were separated from their wives and children. It's very hard. It's devastating what General Motors has done to the working class and to this region.

BT: Do you know others who were affected by the plant closing?

AL: Yes, all of my coworkers.

BT: Ok, and how did they react to finding out that the plant was closing?

AL: Well, everyone was devastated because it's horrible news. It's bad for everyone.

BT: Do you know someone who is participating in the UAW strike?

AL: Yes, I know all of my coworkers who are participating.

BT: Are you participating?

AL: Yes, I participated in the strike. It just ended—

BT: Ok.

AL: Yesterday.

BT: Oh wow!

AL: Yeah.

BT: Ok. What does family mean to you?

AL: Well, it's the most important thing that there is. It's the core that gives life to everything, right?

BT: Yeah. Who do you consider family?

AL: My immediate family and friends as well. There are circumstances in which I consider them family too.

BT: Ok. I've heard that your sons have a band. When did they start to show interest in music?

AL: The one who first started—well, three of my boys are in a group together. They are called The Labra Brothers. Three of them play, and in addition, there are two or three more when they play in a bigger group... to back them up with more instruments. My son first showed interest in music when he was like four years old.

BT: Wow.

AL: Yeah. So he is the first one, and I bought a guitar and I knew how to play it a little. So, I taught him to play in Spanish, to sing songs in Spanish and all that. And he continued until—after that, he taught his other brother how to play the guitar, and then the other one taught the other [brother]. So umm, Adrian started to play here locally in cafes and stuff like that. And from there, they started a group. But then they said, "Well, we have three guitars. Why don't you learn how to play the bass? And you, learn

how to play the saxophone.” Those were the orders that Adrian gave them and they did it and they have kept it up and—

BT: Ok, and—oh, were you done talking?

AL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BT: Ok. When did they start to play together?

AL: I think they started playing together in 2014.

BT: OK.

AL: In 2014, we went to Mexico, they had already played together as a little group, but we went there, to a night club where there was a band playing and they asked them if they could play a few songs [there]. And there, they loved seeing how the crowd reacted and all that. [When] they came back from [Mexico], after their vacation there, they were looking forward to forming a group.

BT: Ok. So now, where do they usually play?

AL: Well, right now, they have—their circle is getting bigger and bigger. For example, four years ago, they wanted to play here in downtown, but they didn’t know who [to contact]. Now, as time goes on, more and more doors are opening for them, places where before they believed that they wouldn’t be invited to. Now, they are invited to play more. Their network is becoming larger. They play more in Cleveland, Akron, Canton, Pennsylvania, umm, and here locally. But they are expanding.

BT: Well, congratulations to them!

AL: Thank you! That’s very kind of you.

BT: How often do they play?

AL: They play—well, they practice at least once week, all of them together. And depending on how they are with family time, well, they plan their practices for once or twice a week, or sometimes they take a break for two or three weeks.

BT: How have you contributed to the Mexican Mutual Society?

AL: Well, I served when I was active. I started out as a regular member and then, I served as vice president and then president of the club.

BT: Ok. And what are you most proud of?

AL: Ahh, I am very proud of having been a part of the club. It definitely gave me satisfaction to lead the club in all that we did.

BT: Would you like to add anything?

AL: No, I just wanted to thank you for being interested in interviewing me. I am very appreciative.

BT: And thank you for coming to do this interview with me.

AL: Brea, it has been a pleasure.

BT: Nice to meet you.

AL: [You are] very kind.

BT: Thank you.

AL: Yeah.