

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 16

Justino Morales
Interview
By
Angelica Diaz
On
March 5, 2020

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INTERVIEWEE: Justino Morales

INTERVIEWER: Angelica Diaz

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

DATE: March 5, 2020

AD: This is an interview with Justino Morales for the Latino Voices of the Valley project for Youngstown State University. The interview is [on March 5, 2020] at Justino Morales' home. We are going to start the interview. I will ask you, Justino, where were you born?

JM: Well, I was born in Puerto Rico in 1928.

AD: And what were your parents like?

JM: Well, my parents got married young. They were dedicated to agriculture and raising a tight-knit family. They had many children of which I was one and I decided in my youth to move to live in the United States.

AD: How many children did she have?

JM: They had 9 children, among them some boys and others were girls, and all were raised in the home.

AD: What was your life like in Puerto Rico, what was your upbringing like?

JM: I grew up in the countryside and my dad was a farmer and I worked day after day with him. Since I was the oldest in the house, I had to do the first jobs and tend to the animals until the age of nineteen.

AD: What was school like in Puerto Rico?

JM: Well, the school in Puerto Rico was far away and I had to walk on foot for an hour. I was almost always late because it was very far away and the school was in the Chino neighborhood of Carite and then later I was in the neighborhood Real de Patillas and then later the Segunda Unidad de Escuela de Guamaní, Puerto Rico.

AD: At what age did you emigrate to the United States?

JM: I decided to move to live in the United States at the age of twenty-four. Well, I was a young man who wanted to progress and in Puerto Rico at that time, wages were not very high. Well, I worked in Puerto Rico for a dollar a day.

AD: Wow, a dollar a day. And where did you work?

JM: Well, I worked at the Muñiz grocery store and at Mr. Soto's warehouse, where I was the sales secretary.

AD: How did you feel when you arrived in Ohio?

JM: When I arrived in Ohio, everything was strange to me because I came in the month of April and that day it was snowing. When you come from a hot-weather to a cold-weather climate, you feel strange and have a heavy heart because you are not used to the cold. I didn't even know that over here I had to wear a coat to cover myself and I didn't even have a coat.

AD: When you came here, did you come with family or did you come alone?

JM: Well, I came. There was a program in Puerto Rico that announced that there was a lot of work here in America and a lot of the youth decided to move to live in the United States. It was during the time of the Korean war and the veterans and youth who were more qualified for the military, well, they went into military service. And those of us who were less [qualified] moved to the United States to do the jobs of the nation.

AD: You had previously told me that you came here with a certain amount of money.

JM: Well, my dad gave me a hundred dollars to pay for the plane ticket to come here. They charged me eighty-eight dollars for the flight from San Juan to Youngstown and I had saved a few bucks and I arrived in Youngstown with about forty dollars.

AD: How was your English when you arrived here?

JM: Well, a teacher who was a specialist in the English language had arrived in Puerto Rico. She had been educated in the state of Illinois and was a very good teacher for those of us who wanted to learn English. She taught us very good English in Puerto Rico and I took advantage of that because I believed that some day I would have to live in America.

AD: When you got here, what was your first job here in Ohio?

JM: Well, I arrived on April 30. And immediately I went to look for the newspaper to see where there was work and there was an ad that General Fire Proofing was hiring and immediately I took the bus and went and filled out an application and after 23 days I got the job. I worked with General Fire Proofing in Department 8 and they kept me on there until 1965.

AD: Tell me Justino, can you describe a typical day at that job?

JM: Well, we started there at 7 in the morning. It was group work, I worked in Department 8 and there was a line where we had many workers. Office chairs were manufactured there. I worked cutting the welding on the chairs in that department. I started out at 8 hours a day.

AD: What difficulties did you experience at that job? Did you face any difficulties?

JM: Well it wasn't that difficult because I wanted to work and I was interested in learning the job very quickly. They gave you an assistant for a few hours and then later they'd let you practice. And there you would continue and you had to do what is called an amount of work per hour. I had a difficult experience because one day, I put on an apron and the machine that I had was tall, with a semi-short cord coming out of it. And one day, the end of the cord got tangled in my apron and I was almost going to hang myself. *[laughter]*

AD: Oh, wow! That's awful! Tell me. How did you meet your wife?

JM: I met my wife when we had a youth organization. The Christian community had begun to develop, and they had founded the Evangelical church and the young people began to visit the church and there we met and developed a Christian society.

AD: How many years have you been married?

JM: I spent the first few years saving a little money because I was paying 5 dollars for a room and if I got married, the rent was going to go up. So I put up with not getting married and staying single until the age of 28. In 1956, then, I decided to marry the person who is today my wife, whose name is Mercedes.

AD: How many years have you been married?

JM: And we have been married since 1956, to this day.

AD: How many children did you have?

JM: We had three children. The oldest, Rebecca, second, David and the third, Esther. And all were raised with us.

AD: And what language did you speak at home when you were raising your children?

JM: At home it was customary to teach the children both languages. To teach them English and teach them Spanish, and also teach them the Christian culture.

AD: What Puerto Rican traditions did you practice with your children?

JM: Well, we always celebrated birthdays, we celebrated the tradition of Thanksgiving, we celebrated Christmas. So, the most fundamental holidays in the United States were always celebrated together with her family and me, who was not part of her family, but since I was her husband... and then with the children, we always celebrated the holidays together.

AD: Now I will ask you – how many times have you returned to Puerto Rico?

JM: Well, I spent many years not going to the island. In 1912, I decided to visit Puerto Rico because...

AD: In 2012, do you mean?

JM: In 2012, because my mother wanted to see me. She was already a little old and we took a trip to bring the children, so that she could meet her grandchildren. We were there for ten days.

AD: Excuse me, did you say in 2012? I'll ask you, what did you do when you went to Puerto Rico? What did you do?

JM: There we went from town to town, because her family and her sister's family and all were in different towns, [we stayed] a little while in each home and ate Puerto Rican food.

AD: By living here in the United States, do you think that you have lost part of your Puerto Rican identity?

JM: No. Well, we have had the privilege that the United States, with its democratic system, has been an advantage for those of us who have moved to live here in America. So it has not been a problem for us Puerto Ricans. Well, we feel as American as we feel Puerto Rican here.

AD: And does your wife cook traditional Puerto Rican food?

JM: Yes, well, when I married her, she didn't know how to cook, but she practiced with the neighbors, because some families lived next to us who were very good neighbors, and she learned how to cook from them, and today she is one of the best cooks in Youngstown. In the Puerto Rican home.

AD: I ask you, is Mercedes Puerto Rican?

JM: We are both Puerto Ricans.

AD: What is your favorite Puerto Rican dish?

JM: We eat general food, we eat healthy, but we really like Puerto Rican meat pies and rice with pigeon peas.

AD: Have you ever thought about going back to Puerto Rico?

JM: Both she and I have not wished to return to live in Puerto Rico. Especially since we are already entering the years of old age, and since our children are here and our grandchildren are here. America is our home.

AD: What do you love most about the Hispanic community here in Youngstown?

JM: Well, we have a great love for the Puerto Ricans who have come to Youngstown. Among them the OCCHA [Organización Cívica y Cultural Hispana Americana] organization was developed, which was an advantage for us for Hispanics and Puerto Ricans. Throughout the years, I have known that there are many good people and many Christians in the region.

AD: You say that OCCHA helped Latinos a lot here?

JM: Yes. OCCHA was a very good organization for all Hispanics and its programming was very good. They have always had quite favorable services for all of us, very good for the Hispanic community and for Americans as well.

AD: Has there been any other organization that you know of that has helped Latinos?

JM: The church in particular, for example. When the Christian community began to develop, the Baptist denomination was in the city of Campbell and in Youngstown there was the Catholic Church, and then later the Evangelicals came and a Puerto Rican Christian community continued to develop in America. It has grown tremendously across the country.

AD: When you refer to the Christian community, to those churches that developed, did they speak Spanish?

JM: Yes, all the programs have been done in Spanish, except when the youth... have not wished to develop the Spanish language as their linguistic foundation. They prefer American churches. There is a strong Puerto Rican community of Hispanic churches in America.

AD: I ask you, what church do you belong to?

JM: I belong to the Church of God, Inc., which began developing the Christian community from 1954 until this day and today we are based in the East side of Youngstown.

AD: You've been in the same church all that time?

JM: Yes, we have been there in that denomination from 1954 until now, 2020.

AD: Do you think the Hispanic church where you belong has helped you maintain your culture strong?

JM: Yes, the church is a conservative church and it is a strong church in the foundation of faith in Jesus

Christ. For Puerto Ricans, it has been very good. We raised the children there; a bilingual community has developed there and now the church has also developed an educational school for Christians and now we are planning to have a new temple on the East side.

AD: How has the Hispanic community changed over the years?

JM: The Hispanic community has developed a lot because when they came here, we called ourselves the “jibaritos de la pala y el pico” (farmers with a shovel and pickaxe) and now, with the United States' educational system, Puerto Ricans have managed to educate themselves to the point of being university students. Of my three children, two are university graduates.

AD: How do you feel about having made your life in the city of Youngstown?

JM: Youngstown has been my special town and I recommend it as one of the best towns to get an education, to work and to live in. I live on Avondale and it is a very good family community area to live in and I recommend Youngstown to all Puerto Ricans and Hispanics.

AD: What legacy do you want to leave as a Puerto Rican man?

JM: As I always dedicated myself mainly to raising my family and now during my retirement, we are forming a Christian church with a school, with an institute where Puerto Ricans are educated for the ministry and for Christian life in a very favorable way. And there we are building a new sanctuary that will be there for at least a hundred years or more.

AD: Anything else you want to add... about from when you arrived until now?

JM: When I arrived as a “jibarito” and almost without money, I didn't have a job for 23 days, and a friend of mine let me stay in his room and he went to work and I slept. And then, on another day, I would look

for work and he would sleep. So, we made things work out very well between us. Then, later, I had to get up early, and a company worker would pick me up at the corner of the avenue to take me to work. So, all of those were very great and very favorable changes. I am very grateful to all those people that have been very friendly, very familiar, very good. Now that I am retired, I am also thankful that Youngstown has allowed me to live here for 90 years.

AD: Have they been good?

JM: They have been special, and I recommend it to all Hispanics. Thank you for the interview.

AD: Thank you, Justino. Excellent, thank you very much.