

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 2

Francisco Nolasco
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
February 7, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Francisco Nolasco

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

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

DATE: February 7, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Francisco Nolasco for the project, Living and Working in Youngstown, Ohio as a Latin American Migrant for Youngstown State University. The interview is on February 7, 2019 in Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley.

FN: Okay, and I'm Francisco Nolasco.

BT: Hi Francisco, how are you?

FN: Very well, I am very well.

BT: Than you. Where were you born?

FN: I was born in Mexico, in the city of Zamora, in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. It is a state and the city is about one hundred and fifty miles west of Mexico City.

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

FN: Six months old.

BT: Six months?!!

FN: Yes, yes.

BT: Wow! Why did your family decide to come to the US?

FN: It's a very long story. I have my family history, it's in Steel Valley Voices—all of my family history—but to [sum it up?], it's that—my parents were here in Ohio and that means that they had to [*laughter*] pick me up in Mexico. My parents weren't really my parents. They went to Mexico to [pick me up?]. I don't know, really, where my family and my parents are from, but they brought me here. And to me, they are my parents or were my parents. It was a story. It was during World War II. Many troops crossed the border because Mexicans had to help Americans with many things at the border. Along with my mother, I was here undocumented—and my father too. [They knew one thing?—that they couldn't bring me to the US. They crossed the border before me, and my mother put me on a train... which had Mexican troops on it, coming to the US. The troops put me there, I had to be taken care of, they had milk and everything to keep me quiet. So, we crossed the border and when we arrived to the United

States my mother and father went immediately to the train and got me and we came here to Ohio. My parents were immigrants here. My father worked in a steel mill, on a railroad, for many years. My mother was, as they would say here, a housewife. But I was the only child they had. So we made it here in Youngstown.

BT: How many years have you lived in Youngstown?

FN: All my life.

BT: All your life, oh wow!

FN: All my life. I am seventy-three years old. All of my life, I've lived here. I've had many jobs. I have traveled throughout the whole world. Spanish helps me a lot. I've had work here, I've gone to Mexico many times to work there in the factories that were set up there... I really like Mexico, but I am more American than Mexican.

I am from Michoacán and Michoacán is filled with many tribes, Indians. I am—I believe that I am one of the Tarascans, the Tarascan Indians from Michoacán. They were very tall and they didn't have much hair, but they had their claim to fame—that tribe of Indians was never conquered by the Aztecs. They never could enslave them, so that is another story—it's another thing about my life. What else?

BT: Have you gone to Mexico to visit?

FN: I haven't gone to Mexico since I stopped working, about fifteen or eighteen years ago. Now I am retired, but I've never gone back to Mexico. I like Mexico a lot. I like the traditions, customs, dances, the music, everything. Many times, I feel more Mexican than American, and vice versa, so I see both countries.

My parents and everyone else who lived in Youngstown worked in the steel mills, so they would meet up. Many people gathered at my house. And me, when I was very young, I liked listening to all the stories because those men were in the Mexican Revolution. Mexico has had many revolutions, and they valued history. I liked hearing things like that. So, it was a Mexican community—it was a very large community in its time. And many times, in our houses, there were dances, people ate and drank and had a good time, but I liked hearing Spanish a lot.

So, at one time, I spoke Spanish better. I went to a Catholic school here and for the first two years of school, I didn't know how to speak English because we only spoke Spanish at home. After a while, children [at school] would say, "Este es un libro. It's a book. This is a policeman, un policía." Like all children that started speaking English afterwards, they had a bit of trouble with that.

BT: Did you feel excluded or as if you weren't part of the school because you didn't know English?

FN: Yes, by everyone, I am going to call them Anglos. But I grew up in a neighborhood here, I don't know—are you from Youngstown?

BT: No.

FN: You aren't from—ok. There is a neighborhood here on the Northside of Youngstown where there are many people from different countries: Italians, Polish, Germans, French, English. It's called Brier Hill, North of here. So, in that community, because there were many languages, because of all the people, I wanted to talk to everyone that was there, especially the Italians, because there were a lot of Italians. The Italian language is like Portuguese, French and Spanish. They are all Latin languages. Therefore, everyone there could communicate a little.

But, I was going to school and I knew the difference that—children sometimes wanted to help me and sometimes not, sometimes they didn't even talk to me, right? But that didn't bother me much because I knew that we were all equal at that time, because we were all poor [*laughter*]. There was no reason that one group of people was better than another. I grew up in those days, in the 50s and a little into the 60s, we were all very close; there was no separation.

When I went to high school, I noticed a difference, a little difference. In my class, in high school, there were just two Latinos and there were two blacks. That's it. But I thought they didn't talk to me or hang out with me because there are different things, but you know how things are in high school, you know? But, I didn't encounter much of that—what you're talking about.

BT: Do you prefer English or Spanish?

FN: Well, because I am here in the US, I prefer English. Very few people speak Spanish here. There is a Mexican community. There is a huge Puerto Rican community. And when I'm with them, well I speak Spanish, if I can. The thing is we need people like me and others who speak Spanish. We've lost our Spanish because of English. With that, many words have been lost. Because, sometimes, when—you will experience this—if you speak Spanish when you come to this country, you think in Spanish and have to translate everything into English, but after a while, everything is in English and you have to translate everything into Spanish when people talk to you. It's something else.

BT: When do you have the chance to speak Spanish?

FN: When we get together. I have Mexican friends that I meet up with once a month, certainly sometimes we get together and we speak Spanish, but [*laughter*] we also speak a lot of English, because we are around the same age. And when people truly want others to understand what they are saying... they say it in Spanish. But now, all of our parents are dead, and there aren't as many opportunities to speak Spanish all the time, every day.

BT: Which Mexican traditions or celebrations do you practice here?

FN: Christmas traditions are important to us Mexicans. In my house, we have a tradition of being there for Christmas. We have Mexican food and drinks. I buy enchiladas and things like that. Also, we have two or three bottles of tequila and Mexican beer.

My father had a tradition that for his birthday—birthday?—, [I mean] New Year's, December 31st, he would climb on top of the roof—because here, Mexicans, the older men have to keep Mexican traditions alive—he would climb on the roof with a pistol, or shotgun, to fire bullets—since they echo.

Also, on September 16th, Mexican Independence Day, all the men climb on the roof to do the same thing, they shout, a shout of freedom. Also they have their shotguns and pistols to amuse themselves.

I really like doing stuff like that. Another tradition that we have is “Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe.” That is very entertaining for us Mexicans and also for Latinos. We have a celebration here at the Cathedral of St. Columba. The bishop attends as well. We invite all Mexican, Hispanics here in the city, and everybody comes. They don’t have to be Hispanic. They have a big celebration. For us Mexicans, Independence Day and the celebration of “Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe” are very important to us.

BT: Do you eat more Mexican or American food?

FN: Well, I like Mexican food a lot, but everyone here, Anglos, they believe that all Mexican food is the same thing: tacos, enchiladas and stuff like that—but in Mexico, depending on the area, they have all different kinds of foods. I really like the food from the state of Michoacán. The restaurant, here, [owned by] Carlos Ramirez, that food is similar to what my mother made. So, I go there a lot because I like the food. I go to other restaurants every once in a while, but I don’t like the food as much in other restaurants. I like home-made food. There, they serve it by hand. I go to that restaurant a lot. For example, this weekend, we’ll go two or three times. I like that food a lot, but Americans like it with cheese. They put cheese on everything and eat it all up [*laughter*]. So, they always put cheese on everything to hide the food. That’s how Anglos like it. Do you like Mexican food?

BT: Yes.

FN: Yeah? That’s good!

BT: But I don’t think I’ve gone to an authentic restaurant.

FN: Ok, well, la Casa Ramirez is authentic.

BT: Ok.

FN: It’s here, on Mahoning Avenue. You should go some time. What else?

BT: What is your favorite dish from Mexico?

FN: My favorite dish?

BT: [*Nods yes*]

FN: I like Steak Tampico. It’s a finely cut steak. I really like meat. In Mexico, it is prepared with everything, you know, with “pico de gallo” and all of that stuff. I like it more like that. Also, I really like enchiladas that are authentic, that are made by hand and then you put them in the oven and cook them like that. I forgot the Spanish word for baked, but it’s like that. I like it a lot.

BT: What aspects do you like most about life in the United States?

FN: I like the freedom here. In Mexico—Mexico is a country of political parties and the presidents are like dictators. There are poor people, Indian people, people that can't speak, that are illiterate, that have many problems. The government doesn't give them much peace. The people from the upper class enslave them. You don't see that in the United States. There is more freedom.

When I used to go to Mexico, many times we would sit down to eat with the managers of the buildings I went to see and I would start to talk about freedom, democracy, and everything that was here—we have freedom here. The Mexicans would tell me, "Mr. Francisco, please, be quiet, the "feds" are listening, and if they don't like what you're saying, we're going to be in trouble," so I don't like feeling like that in a country. I couldn't live in a country like that, but here I have freedom of speech. If I don't like something, I can say something. If I don't like something, I can read more or write to the newspaper, or to a TV station, because here we are a bit freer.

BT: What aspects do you like least?

FN: About—?

BT: About life in the US?

FN: I don't like how Mexicans are treated here, especially at the border, what is happening with immigration. The separation of families, very bad things, that has to stop. And it is going to stop because my generation and my children's generation and the generation of grandkids, all of them will have different things [views?] because they are going to marry more Anglos. They will change history a bit; culture is going to change, it has to change. I don't like how Mexicans are being treated right now, or immigrants or all Latin Americans. Let's see if we can change politics.

BT: What makes you unique in this world?

FN: What makes a person unique? Let me see if I understand what you are saying. A unique person should be a person that is at peace with their life, with their decisions, at peace with everyone. [A person that] has opportunities, and creates those opportunities, and takes advantage of those opportunities. A person has to be intelligent. They have to speak, write and read everything. They have to take everything in so that they can make their own decisions, the right [decisions]. I believe it's a person that has lived—I've lived many years, seen many things, traveled the world, [and] seen many people. I'm sure that with time, everyone will be like me, if they have the chance.

BT: How would you describe yourself?

FN: I was born in Mexico. I have a lot of faith in the world, in God, in everything. I've lived a very peaceful life. I have many people's respect here. I am a part of many clubs. I am on Boards of Directors. I am a director of many things in the community. I give my time and [share] my intelligence with the world. If they want me, they call me and I am there.

BT: What does community mean to you?

FN: The world is the community to me, but the community here is the city. It's that we are all human and we all have the same faith that our children will be better than us. Doing that, well, there is community in all of that. It's very important. I know that there are many prejudices with many people. For example, I have a job. I work four or five hours a day delivering food to the poor people of Youngstown. There are many Latinos and also people of all types: blacks, whites, people that don't speak much English, people that live in poor houses, but it is a community. When I talk to them and give them faith, I tell them that they are going to be okay, have faith in what is going to happen and if you have the chance, educate your sons, educate your daughters, educate everyone. That, to me, is community.

BT: What do you do in your community or for your community?

FN: For many years, I was on the Board of Directors of OCCHA [Organización Cívica y Cultural Hispana Americana] and I spent a lot of time there. I have a company that donates money to OCCHA, quite a bit of money each year. I like to do that. As I said, I have a job in which I feed a lot of people. So, I do that for the community. And I like to meet up with a lot with Mexicans that are together, those that are still alive, to talk, to see what we are going to do. I really like how—back in the day, there were more of us here, but now there aren't enough—but this is what I do. And I was saying before, I am on a lot of Boards of Directors and everyone knows that I am Hispanic and everyone knows that my culture is part of me and... I'm Mexican and they like that I say what I think.

BT: Do you consider yourself a community leader?

FN: Yes.

BT: In what way?

FN: Well, like I said, I was on the Board of OCCHA and I still do that. I represent Hispanics in another organization called MYCAP [Mahoning Youngstown Community Action Partnership]. I represent Hispanics on another Board of Directors called Curbstone Coaches. I've gone to schools many times to talk about my culture—even to Cleveland, I've gone to talk about my culture—and how I arrived here in the US. Also, I've [given presentations about Mexicans here]—I've been in historical agencies throughout the community. I've given presentations about what we were before and what we are going to do.

BT: What challenges have you had to face [in your position on the Board of Directors]?

FN: I can talk about one time, one of the people on the Board didn't want me to present something—an award. They didn't want me to present [it] because I wasn't like them. Well, I said I was going to do that. The people asked me to do it and I'm going to do it. They got mad—the ones that didn't want me to be there. But I said, well I'm not going to get mad at them, I'm going to do the best that I can with the presentation. So, I talked about twenty minutes about what we had to do there. After that, the people that were against me were now telling me, "Great job, thank you, great job!" Many people have

different expectations. If you say that you are Hispanic or Latino or Chicano [Mexican American], you have different expectations, but I like to change those expectations.

BT: What is the greatest obstacle you've overcome?

FN: I wanted to accomplish more in my education, but I didn't have time to do that. It could have been because of family. I graduated from college, but I wanted to get my Master's, but I couldn't, I didn't have time to do that with a family and all. That is the obstacle—that I could've done more, but it didn't happen. It's something that concerns me. But my son is here working at the university. He has his Master's and everything. I'm very proud of him.

BT: How do you want to be remembered?

FN: Well, in Steel Valley Voices, there is a passage written about my parents, and it's very important to me. I wanted to be remembered for everything I have done in my lifetime—for being human—for being Mexican, Latino—overall, [I want people to remember] that I was a good person. And with respect to everyone, I did my part.

BT: Well, thank you for your time. Thank you for telling me about your life.

FN: Okay.