

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 3

Elba Navarro
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
February 28, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Elba Navarro

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

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

DATE: February 28, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Elba Navarro for the project, Living and Working in Youngstown, Ohio as a Latin American Migrant for Youngstown State University. The interview is on February 28, 2019 in Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Elba, how are you?

EN: Very well, and you?

BT: Good, thank you. Where were you born?

EN: I was born in Guanadillas, Puerto Rico.

BT: How old were you when you came to the US?

EN: I came to the United States when I was three years old.

BT: Three years old, wow! Why did your family decide to come to the US?

EN: Well, my father died and I was nine months old, and I had a sister, Alicia. Alicia was twelve [5th grade?]*...* and me, a baby. And so, my mother was single—widowed for three years. After three years, she got married. My stepfather decided to come to the US and he went to Lorain, Ohio. There, he met friends. Someone told him that in Campbell, Ohio, they were looking for workers and they all [my father and his friends] went in 1947. So, he sent for us in 1948. Now my mother had had a nine-month old baby.

BT: Why did your stepfather decide to come to the US?

EN: To work in Campbell, because of steel—it was a company that made steel and they were looking for workers.

BT: Describe your childhood.

EN: We talk a lot [*laughter*]*—*my friends, my cousins—about when we were growing up. It was a great childhood. I went to school. I didn't know English when I went to school. When I went to Kindergarten, I didn't know English because my mother—they spoke Spanish at home. But I went to Kindergarten and I learned English very quickly.

BT: Did you feel excluded at school?

EN: No.

BT: Never?

EN: Never. My little sister, the youngest, she also—you know, not like today, how the kids are always in the house—we used to play outside in the street, in the neighborhood, and everyone talked. All of us played and talked a lot and I learned English very quickly.

BT: So, describe the first neighborhood that you lived in.

EN: We lived on the Southside and like I told you, there were houses, many houses and many children, and some went—I went to public school and my sisters went to Catholic school, private—but in the afternoon, everyone played [*laughter*], and we played outside.

BT: And did the children know English?

EN: Yes

BT: Oh! Spanish, sorry.

EN: No, nobody. Nobody, other than my sisters and I. My sisters and I spoke Spanish. The rest spoke English.

BT: Ok. When do you have the opportunity to speak Spanish nowadays?

EN: [*Laughter*] Always. My husband, he has a business and since he talks all day, he speaks with them in English. Then, when he comes home, well, he tends to speak English more, but we speak both [*laughter*], because I speak Spanish and I talk to him in English. And so, when we go to church—I go to church in Campbell, Ohio—the service is in Spanish and I speak Spanish.

BT: Do you prefer speaking English or Spanish more?

EN: Both languages.

BT: In which language is it easier to express yourself in?

EN: Both.

BT: Are there situations in which you prefer one language over the other?

EN: Yeah, I was going to tell you that. One time, I was in a meeting and we were talking about prayer and someone said, “In which language is it easier for you to pray?” I told them, “You know something? When I pray, I pray in Spanish” [*laughter*]. I don’t know if it is because of my mother, but—

BT: Do you identify more with Puerto Rican or American culture?

EN: American.

BT: Why?

EN: Because I was raised here, my whole life and this town is small. You know? This town is a small town. There aren't many Latinos, and we say that sometimes. There aren't many Latinos and the Latinos that are here, it's like everyone is in different parts. I mean not everyone is in Youngstown.

BT: What traditions or celebrations do you practice here?

EN: Here in the church—what I like most is—and I go to Puerto Rico a lot—Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve is a beautiful tradition and many people here keep that tradition. Also, Three Kings' Day, which we celebrate in church with the children. This year, we threw a beautiful party for the children.

BT: [Is there] something else about Puerto Rico that is different from the US? Do you remember?

EN: When I go to Puerto Rico, especially today, there are two cultures in Puerto Rico. You see as much American culture as you do the Puerto Rican culture; and both are beautiful. What I like most about Puerto Rico is the food, because here it is a small town, and we don't have that food here, unless you go somewhere far to buy it, but in Puerto Rico, the food is so—there's everything.

One thing that I love—I was talking to someone from Puerto Rico about that—that when you go into a restaurant and you see people when you go in and you say, "Enjoy your meal," I love it. I love [laughter] when people say "Enjoy your meal". They go there and they look at you and say "Enjoy your meal." Another thing that I like a lot about Puerto Rico is when I've gone to Puerto Rico and there is somebody sick in the hospital, and I realized that in a doctor's office, everybody that enters says, "Good morning." I love that too. Here you don't see that. Right?

BT: Yes, it's true. The people are warmer, more—

EN: [Here] when someone enters an office, they enter very quietly, they look for a seat and they sit.

BT: I understand. What is your favorite Puerto Rican food?

EN: From Puerto Rico, rice with "gandules" [pigeon peas] and "lechón" [roasted piglet] and "mofongo" [a dish made with fried plantains].

BT: I don't know what "lechón" is.

EN: Pork

BT: Ok, ok, I understand.

EN: A lot of people say pork, "lechón".

BT: When you were younger, how did you imagine your life in the future?

EN: Well, in my life, I always dreamed about two things: one, I accomplished and that was that I always wanted to be a teacher, always, since I was little. I always wanted to be a teacher. My younger sister wanted to be a nurse, so we would play make believe. I was the teacher. She [my sister] and my nieces and nephews sat and I taught them because I wanted to be a teacher. And the other was to have kids after getting married, but that, I didn't accomplish. But being a teacher, yes, for thirty years.

BT: Why did you want to be a teacher?

EN: Because one, I loved children, and another thing was that I admired my teachers so much. I admired that they could stand in front of a class and teach children and that fascinated me.

BT: How is your life different from the one you imagined?

EN: From what I imagined, well, there aren't any children, but my husband and I have many nieces and nephews, whom we see and help. That is something I never believed because they [my parents] were both poor. They weren't parents that had money. Only my father worked. My mother didn't work; she was a housewife, but we had only what we needed during our childhood. Now, my husband and I have worked so much that we have a lot to be able to help. And that is how my life has been very different.

BT: How do you define family?

EN: Family has to be—and my husband and I talk about what is happening today—that before, we were poor, but we knew we had family. And my husband says that he was raised—he came when he was 14 years old from Puerto Rico, and he remembers his grandparents on both sides, uncles, aunts, cousins, a huge family, and everybody helped out. And today, I don't know, it's that life is harder, everybody is so busy, they have to work more, children are more involved, it's just not the same.

BT: How did you meet your husband?

EN: [*Laughter*] My husband and I met each other—I lived on the Southside of Youngstown, and he lived on the Eastside, and church was on the Eastside and my cousins that are very—we get along very, very well—and my friends lived on the Eastside. I went to church and spent time with them, with my cousins. I had a friend, we got along very well, and when I went to mass, well I would stay at her house or we would go to the movies and I would see my husband. After that, I was working, actually studying in downtown Youngstown, at a beauty school. It was a beauty school in town, and there he came [to the court?] and then we would go to a place called Strouss where they sold food and if I was there, well we would start to talk. That is where it all started.

BT: What does education mean to you?

EN: Education is so, so important. Every time—it reminds me of my mother because she didn't have an education. She was a housewife and that was her life, but she always told us that if we wanted a better life, to have better things, and—the future was education.

BT: So basically, it open doors for opportunities.

EN: Education is so, so important and I thank my mother for always telling us that.

BT: How has your education contributed to your accomplishments or success today?

EN: Education has helped me tremendously, helped others—

BT: In what aspect?

EN: ...And talking to children about how important it is. One way or another, anyone can make it out of poverty, from where you are, and it is with education. When I encounter someone, a young person, I talk to them about that. Education is so important. You are going to open so many doors for yourself, and I've worked with so many high school students and I talked to them about that. You don't have to stay here. You can go to school. You can study. You can go to the army. And you can leave Youngstown. It doesn't mean that you have to stay here; but with education, you can move, you can go somewhere else. I realized that—I went to Puerto Rico in January, and I was there seventeen days and I realized how important education is, and so many people have graduated from high school.

BT: I know you were a teacher before. What was your favorite part of your job?

EN: When I went to college, I studied English, Spanish and Education. When I finished, I graduated. They asked me—Youngstown Board of Education had to open a bilingual program because they had a lot of Hispanic kids that needed help. Well, I said, "Oh! I'm going to start the program." And when I started the program, it was me and another teacher and they didn't want me to go... I thought that I didn't want to teach small children. I wanted high school. The kids were in third, fourth, fifth, sixth [grade] and the other teacher had Kindergarten, first and second, but the thing was that I fell in love with the students. I loved it and as I was teaching, it made me happy when they [the students] were learning English so fast, because I taught everything in Spanish and taught them English during English period. It was great when they started speaking [English]. "Ay [Oh], I can do everything in English, Miss E, I can do everything in English!" [*laughter*]. And when I see them, they still remember. "I remember you were the one who taught me English." So, I was there fifteen years and then I decided—I always wanted to be a Spanish teacher and I wanted to teach Spanish in high school. So that is how I had the opportunity of going to Chaney High School for fifteen years.

BT: How many years did you teach?

EN: Thirty.

BT: Define community.

EN: Community is a group of people together that help each other, that know what you need. And if you need help, they help you find that help. It's not one of those things where I'm fine and the rest are over there. To me, that is community. That is what we saw before. We talked about that; that we saw that before. We all lived—not rich, but [we were] rich in that sense, that we had a house, with a mother in the home. We had home-cooked meals, the children were always happy, we always played outside, but that was also the community, who helped out.

And if I can tell you about when I went to Puerto Rico recently—I was talking to a woman in a restaurant, and we were outside, and all of a sudden, we started talking. We were looking at the scenery and she started to tell me about the hurricane in Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria, and she tells me, “You know (ma’am), we—it’s like we needed that hurricane because it wasn’t the same here anymore. You didn’t know who lived on your street, they didn’t even talk about you.” With that, she says, “You saw people looking for you—look, I have a little bit of water, do you want some? Do you want that?” She says, “We’ve started helping each other again, being neighbors again,” the woman said to me.

BT: How have you contributed to your community?

EN: As I’ve told you, my husband and I have contributed so, so much. The first thing we did was an organization called OCCHA [Organización Cívica y Cultura Hispana Americana], and in 2001, my husband bought a building for OCCHA, an agency, and that was the first thing. After that, in 2001, we started [giving] scholarships to Hispanic students at Youngstown State University to help [them]. From there, thank God, we’ve continued to do this for three years. There is a scholarship for Business majors, because my husband has a business... Last year, we gave out ten. This year, last week, there were ten more, for the fall [semester]. There are ten in STEM, for ten students, and with the other one, the Navarros, there are thirty scholarship [total].

BT: Wow! How would you describe yourself?

EN: I don’t know. I am a very—I believe I am a humble person. I love helping others. I have—I would say that other people say—a good heart. I like defending others. My mother told me one day, “You should have been a lawyer, not a teacher.” I always try to look for the good in others, what it is that makes [a person] good, makes them human. I always like looking for that first.

BT: What is your biggest accomplishment?

EN: My biggest accomplishment, I believe—first—being a good person, being a good wife. I was a good daughter and a very good sister. And I hope many students say that I was a good teacher.

BT: Why do you consider that your biggest accomplishment?

EN: Because I believe it’s always what God wants for somebody—that they help. And if I got married, it was to help my husband, because that’s what I saw in my household too, with my mom and stepdad. I like seeing people doing well, and if they need help, one should help.

BT: What are you most proud of?

EN: Coming from a poor family—I was able to accomplish what I wanted. That I always, I’d say since five or six years old, I wanted to be a teacher, always, I wanted to be a teacher and help [students] and teach them what I know. Also, my younger sister was able to become a nurse, she did it. My other sister was a stylist. Coming from a poor family, we all got what we wanted.

BT: How do you want to be remembered?

EN: I'd like to be remembered for coming here, living, loving, and helping.

BT: Well, that's it. Thank you for your time, thank you for telling me about your interesting experience.

EN: Thank you [*laughter*].

BT: Your interview made me happy.

EN: You can be what you want to be, right?

BT: Right.

EN: That is what I told my students—even the little ones—when I started [teaching]—they were in third grade, fourth, or fifth [grade], and I told them, you can be what you want to be—and now, when I see them—that happiness—they are nurses, teachers, police officers, [*laughter*] secretaries—that is the beautiful thing. And with my husband's scholarship—because he's the one with the business—that's what he wants, to help the community—that's what needed, instead of fighting and talking, right? We are going to help students—that is what he says—that is the future.

BT: Well, nice to meet you. [*handshake*]

EN: Okay [*laughter*].

BT: It was a pleasure.

EN: Hopefully, I've helped you. [*laughter*]

BT: You've helped me a lot, thank you.

EN: Do you have—you aren't married, are you?

BT: No.

EN: Do you have a boyfriend.

BT: No.

EN: Very good [*laughter*].

BT: I am twenty years old.

EN: Ah, you have plenty of time.

BT: I am studying for now.

EN: You are studying. You have to be focused on your studies—that's what I say—and after that, everything falls into place, little by little. I was lucky because I got married at nineteen. But then when—remember I said—that I went to a beauty school in town—I did it for four years, but—that isn't what I

wanted—so, I said, “I want to be a teacher.” And so, I went to college and I loved it, and I left after three years with a Bachelor’s degree [*laughter*].

BT: Well, thank you once again.

EN: Okay. Are you going to the university?

BT: No, I am—

EN: Free?

BT: Yes