

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 4

Maria Class
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
July 15, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Maria Class

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

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

DATE: July 15, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Maria Class for the project, "Latino Voices of the Valley" for Youngstown State University. The interview is on July 15, 2019 at the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Maria, how are you?

MC: Pretty well, thank you, and you?

BT: I'm good, thanks for asking. So, where were you born?

MC: I was born in Ciales, Puerto Rico.

BT: Ok, and how old were you when you came to the United States?

MC: Well, I was very little. My older sister was born in Puerto Rico, she was born in Ciales. My brother was born here—he is older than me—and I was born in Puerto Rico. I don't know how *[laughter]*, because I know that they are living here. You know, maybe it was because they were visiting when that happened.

BT: Do you know why your parents decided to move here?

MC: To find a job. My father worked on the railroads. A lot of people came here and worked in the steel mills, but my father worked on the tracks. I know at first, when he didn't have a job, he worked on an apple orchard, you know?

BT: Ok, I understand. So, you were born in Puerto Rico and came here when you were very young, right?

MC: Yes.

BT: So, when you started school, did you know any English?

MC: Yes.

BT: Yeah?

MC: Because at home, at that time, although we spoke both languages, English and Spanish, people gave us mean looks when we spoke Spanish in public. So, my father said that we don't speak Spanish in public, only at home. [He said that] we have to speak English.

BT: And how did you learn English?

MC: Well, I think by listening to music, watching TV, and also, my mother went to school in Puerto Rico—in Puerto Rico, she learned both languages. In Puerto Rico, it is mandatory that, since we are a Commonwealth of the US, we have to learn English.

BT: Ok. Do you prefer to speak one language over the other, or...?

MC: I learned more Spanish when I married a Dominican, because my father-in-law said that if I was a true Puerto Rican, then I had to speak Spanish. In his house, everyone had to speak Spanish.

BT: Do you prefer to be called and Puerto Rican, Boricua, Latina, American, or something else? And why?

MC: Puerto Rican, although my cousins call me *gringa*, since I live here. Boricua doesn't bother me, same with Latina, it doesn't bother me, because we are a race that speaks Spanish. So, there are different languages, or dialects in Spanish. There's nothing wrong with it in my opinion.

BT: Could you tell me about some differences between Puerto Rico and the US?

MC: Well, I know that when I used to visit and I would stay in the summer for a month with my grandma, uncles and aunts, cousins, the difference I saw is the environment. Hispanics are very united. There were patron saints' festivals—the music—and spending summers there, I learned more Spanish. Seeing that many people were working on their farms, planting [crops], eating from their farms, behind—here, you have to go to the store. Also, a lot has changed because we are a part of the US. A lot of things are Americanized. You see Burger King, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, all of that; but also you can get “sancocho” [a type of soup], “sofrito” [a sauce], a store that only has Hispanic products and some things, you know, some American things that you can get.

BT: Ok.

MC: The clothing style is different as well.

BT: Ok, could you describe the patron saints' festivals?

MC: It's like the festivals here, in the church.

BT: Ok.

MC: They are like that, you know, there is Hispanic music, Hispanic customs. I remember when my cousin...when he was younger than the fourth grade, the students had to learn folkloric dances.

BT: Hmm.

MC: You know, dance *la bomba*, *la plena*. That was a custom that they had in their school.

BT: Hmm.

MC: [In] public, it's having to learn, and that was good in my opinion.

BT: What Puerto Rican traditions or celebrations do you still practice here?

MC: Well, for my daughter, we celebrated her “quinceañera” [celebration of a girl's 15th birthday]. My mom had one. I didn't have one because here they celebrate “Sweet 16”, so, for my daughter, my mom wanted [to have] her “quinceañera”. That was something that here, we are doing... making desserts

for—during Christmas—making cookies, “dulce de coco” [a coconut dessert] and “arroz con dulce” [sweet rice], stuff like that.

BT: What is your favorite Puerto Rican dish?

MC: Well, rice and pigeon peas, [¿?], fried ripe plantains, fried plantains, mofongo [fried plantain dish], pastelillos [turnovers], alcapurrias [fritters]...

BT: Everything.

MC: Potatoes, everything [*laughter*].

BT: [*laughter*]. You have children, right?

MC: Yes.

BT: So, do your children know how to cook Puerto Rican food?

MC: Yes, my daughter—my oldest children, their father is Dominican. My son knows how to cook—and he is thirty-seven years old and knows how to cook. My daughter knows how to cook. The only one, my little boy, whose father is—how do you say it— Black American, he likes Hispanic food. He dances merengue, bachata, salsa, in addition to the American dances here. He wants to learn how to cook Hispanic food.

BT: Are there any Puerto Rican traditions or celebrations that you practice, but that your children don't?

MC: For me, I am going to say that after my mom died, many of the traditions we had when I was growing up were lost. And I don't know if it's because our family is very small—my uncles, aunts, and many of my cousin all live in Puerto Rico. Some of them moved to Florida or Detroit or Philly. So only having my siblings, a lot of things have changed.

BT: Are there any Puerto Rican traditions that you wish were celebrated here?

MC: I believe that with the ones that I—if I would have continued to go to church—I grew up Catholic and I stopped going to church. It was my choice, but many times, I miss it because I grew up in church—in part of the church—and so connected to the community.

BT: So, in your opinion, have you lost part of your identity living in the United States?

MC: Yes.

BT: How?

MC: For me, yes, but also, I don't blame it on where I live. Now, there are more Hispanics. There are more Puerto Ricans since Hurricane Maria. And who knows? Them being here could bring back some traditions. But, like I said, it's a shame, but I blame myself as well, because if I wanted to continue [the traditions], I have the same right to continue them as my mother did, but I don't have the desire to.

BT: I understand. I've heard that you studied at Penn Ohio Jr. College. What did you study?

MC: [I took] secretary classes.

BT: And what is your job now?

MC: I have a job in which I help those who don't have enough insurance or no insurance at all to pay their hospital bills.

BT: Ok. As a child, how did you imagine your life in the future?

MC: I wanted to be an airline stewardess. I wanted to do that, but I'm scared of needles, for vaccines, so [*laughter and wags finger*] no.

BT: [*laughter*]. How is your life different from the one you imagined?

MC: I can't complain because I have three children that—if it weren't for their father, or me meeting their father, I would not have the children or grandchildren that I have. I can't complain because I have a roof over my head, good health and a family.

BT: What does community mean to you?

MC: I think that the community is—how do I say it—to me, it's not as close as it was before, as when I was growing up. And I don't know if it's because everyone works every day of the week. Before, Sundays were for family and church, to be with God and spend time with God, to spend time with your family. Nowadays, it's work and sometimes, if it's with family, it's good. But if you seek out your family, you seek them out, but if you don't, you don't.

BT: How have you contributed to your community?

MC: Well before, I was more active in the community than now. I was involved in the church, with the youth. I was involved in OCCHA. I was the coordinator of a youth dance group. I was involved in—I don't know. I was more involved in the community before. And like I said, this is me, you know? When things change, sometimes people don't accept those changes and reject them. Others keep moving forward.

BT: How many years did you teach dancing?

MC: Wow. I would say six or seven years. My daughter was in the group. So, my two children were in the group. They danced cumbia, salsa, merengue, bachata. I brought them to do dance performances in nursing homes, they danced for the [Summer Festival of the] Arts at YSU [Youngstown State University], and we were with another group, with Karen Clark-Green. She had a dance group at church, and we—they invited us to dance—and for Mandela's daughter, Nelson Mandela—up in Cleveland, we had that opportunity, and that is how I dedicated my time. It wasn't a job, no pay or anything. The group raised funds for materials, for their dresses, their costumes, and all of that.

BT: Why did you stop? Why did you stop teaching dance classes?

MC: There was a conflict with my job, and besides, they found another person to do it.

BT: Do you still have contact with the Hispanic community today?

MC: Yes, but not like before. It's changed.

BT: What are you most proud of?

MC: That my father taught me to be a—my parents, both my mother and my father taught me to be a self-sufficient woman, not to be lazy, and to be responsible.

BT: Ok. Is that all?

MC: That's all.

BT: How do you want to be remembered?

MC: Wow, I don't know.

BT: [It's] a deep question, isn't it?

MC: It is.

MC: I'd say I want to be remembered for—if I could help you, I'd help you. If I'd try—I try to treat others as I'd want them to treat me. I give you respect, so I expect the same in return. It's difficult to treat—it's my job, just like in my personal life. I am a person that—if you treat me well, I will treat you well. I want people to think, wow, she is a person of her word.

BT: Ok, I understand.

BT: Ok, thank you for your time. Thank you for helping me with my project, and well, thank you. Nice meeting you.

MC: Same to you.

BT: Thank you.