

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 5

Iris Gugliucello
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
July 24, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Iris Guglucello

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

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

DATE: July 24, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Iris Guglucello for the project, “Latino Voices of Valley” for Youngstown State University. The interview is on July 24, 2019 at the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Iris. How are you?

IG: Hello, [I’m] fine, and you?

BT: I am great, thankfully. Where were you born?

IG: I was born in Fajardo, Puerto Rico.

BT: Have you visited—or have you gone back to visit Puerto Rico?

IG: Yes, many times. My parents—my father went back to Puerto Rico in 1978 and since that year, I have visited Puerto Rico once or twice a year.

BT: Usually, when you visit Puerto Rico, what do you do?

IG: Visit family, go to the beach, eat “frituras” [fried foods]—and visit San Juan, and other beautiful places in Puerto Rico.

BT: Ok. What do you like most about Puerto Rico?

IG: Well, the weather. It’s very beautiful and the people are very friendly.

BT: Ok. Why did your family decide to come to the United States?

IG: Well, the decision wasn’t mine. My father came here to work in the steel mills, and he came in 1951. After that, he sent for me, my sister and my mom. We moved here in 1952 and we returned to Puerto Rico in 1953 because of a strike in the steel mills, and my father had lost his job and decided to move back to Puerto Rico again. But afterwards, they called him to work again and he came back. My mom, sister, and I came back to the US in 1955.

BT: Okay. As a child, did you speak more Spanish or English at home?

IG: Spanish.

BT: Spanish, so when you went to school, did you know how to speak English already?

IG: No. I started school in 1955 and I didn’t speak English.

BT: Ok. And was it hard for you to learn.

IG: No.

BT: No, not at all, and how did you learn?

IG: In school, watching television—when you are fairly young, it's easy to learn another language, especially if you hear it every day, watch television, and go to school every day and they are speaking English.

BT: I understand. Nowadays, when do you have the chance to speak Spanish?

IG: Rarely. My husband is American and he doesn't speak Spanish. My parents, both are dead. My sister—I have a sister—she lives in Florida. My nieces and nephews live all over the United States, so I have few opportunities to speak it.

BT: Have you tried teaching your husband—

IG: Yes, but he's Italian and doesn't know how to speak Italian—He's tried and he even took it [Italian] in school, but he doesn't have a knack for it [learning languages].

BT: Okay. What Puerto Rican traditions or celebrations did your parents teach you that you still practice here in the United States?

IG: None. I was raised here. In Puerto Rico, I remember on Christmas, we celebrated twelve days after Christmas, until January 6, when the Three Wise Men came. In Puerto Rico, the celebration lasted that entire time. Anyway, on Three Kings' Day, we put out food for the kings and we celebrated that day singing the rosary, drinking, talking and dancing.

Here, when my parents were here, they still did that with their friends, and when I lived with them, I also participated. But, since they moved to Puerto Rico, I haven't participated in those types of celebrations.

BT: Ok. Are there any traditions you wish were celebrated here?

IG: Ah, I can't think of any traditions. That tradition—the Puerto Ricans that live here still celebrate it. Not all, and not so intensely, but—and it's a very nice tradition, I like it, but I'm not religious.

BT: Okay. [*Nods*]

IG: And it's one of the religious traditions.

BT: Do you remember many Puerto Rican traditions, or not really?

IG: Well, when I was younger, many of the Puerto Ricans had—I forget what it's called—a quinceañera. It celebrates a girl's fifteenth birthday. I went to those celebrations but it wasn't something we celebrated in my family.

BT: Ah, okay, I understand.

IG: I don't believe it's a tradition that's necessary to continue, quite frankly.

BT: Do you have children?

IG: No.

BT: Okay, what is your favorite dish from Puerto Rico?

IG: My favorite dish—probably “pasteles”. And after “pasteles”, I like sweet plantains with meat, which—I don’t know what it’s called, I don’t remember what it’s called, but I like sweet plantains with meat inside...

BT: Mmmm.

IG: ...anything with sweet plantains.

BT: Pasteles, they are like empanadas?

IG: No, those are pastelillos.

BT: Okay

IG: We call an empanada a pastelillo. Pasteles are made with green bananas, plantains, yautia, which is made with a—it’s shredded with a grater and it’s made into a batter. Then, it’s put on a banana leaf, which is impermeable to water. Then, pork is put in the center and it’s folded, put in water and cooked—

BT: Okay, like a tamale.

IG: Like a tamale.

BT: Okay. [*smiles*]

IG: But it is made with root vegetables.

BT: Ok, like yuca, yautia—

IG: [*nods*] like yuca, yautia, like—yes, especially unripe bananas.

BT: Okay. Although you were born—or grew up in the US, are there times that you feel more Puerto Rican?

IG: Oh, yeah, especially if there’s music, because when I was younger, I loved to dance—I don’t dance well, but I liked it. And when I was younger, at every party where there were Puerto Ricans—if it was a wedding reception, a birthday party or something like that, they were always dancing a lot. I loved to dance. Even now, when I hear Latino music, I feel like dancing.

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

IG: Yes. I really like to read. And when I was younger, I studied Spanish in college, and I read a lot of novels, many books in Spanish. I’ve stopped doing that. Every once in a while, I feel like reading a book, a novel in Spanish and I start reading. It’s not easy for me now like it was before. I have to use the dictionary a lot. So since it takes much more time to read in Spanish than in English, well, it’s easier to pick up a book in English. So, umm yeah, I would like the chance to practice reading Spanish more. But I go to Puerto Rico a lot—not as much now, because my parents have passed, but when they were alive, I

visited there much more than I do now, to see them. Now, the incentive to go to Puerto Rico isn't there as much and I'm forgetting vocabulary.

BT: Are there any more instances in which you prefer to speak Spanish more than English?

IG: Yes, if I am in a group of Puerto Ricans, or a group of people who speak Spanish—we visited Spain, you know, two years ago. When I was in Spain, I liked speaking to them in Spanish because they understood me, and I understood them. It's different travelling somewhere where you don't know the language.

BT: Okay. This newspaper article is about a celebration that happened in Puerto Rico, right?

IG: No, that celebration was here.

BT: Okay. Could you describe the event to me? [*Shows the newspaper article*].

IG: This event took place in Campbell, Ohio. It was the early 50s, when many Puerto Ricans had moved here from Puerto Rico and from New York, to work in the steel mills. In this picture, my sister, my mother and I just came here from Puerto Rico, because it's 1952. And umm, there was like a—a social club had been created so that Puerto Ricans had a place to gather and learn American customs and other things that they needed to develop. This celebration was September 21, 1952. At that time, the newspaper, *The Vindicator*, had a section, rotogravure, and that's the section that they called the Brown Section of the newspaper.

BT: Okay.

IG: And they were only documenting the celebration that the Puerto Ricans had here.

BT: How old were you?

IG: I was two years old.

IG: Eighteen months.

BT: Wow, okay. You had worked in a steel mill, right?

IG: Yes.

BT: Could you tell me about that job?

IG: My father worked at Youngstown Sheet and Tube. All of his friends worked at Youngstown Sheet and Tube. All of the older men that I knew worked at Youngstown Sheet and Tube, because that is why they came to this city.

When I was at the university in Akron, they had a program for women who were studying and could work for three months during the summer in a factory to make money to continue their education. And I—well, I went to work at Republic Steel, which was one of the only factories that remained—because Youngstown Sheet and Tube no longer existed, it had left the city. I helped the workers who entered the furnace to lay bricks for the furnace. They had their bricks and the mortar for the bricks and I tossed the bricks to them.

BT: Okay.

IG: But that was a hard job, especially during the summer because they shut the furnace and then when we entered, it was still very, very hot.

BT: I'm sure. You are a member of OCCHA [Organización Cívica y Cultural Hispana Americana], right?

IG: Yes.

BT: Ok, could you tell me about some of the activities at OCCHA?

IG: Well, the activity that I participate in at OCCHA is a scholarship that they give out yearly to a Latino student in the area that wants to continue their education in college. I know they have a party every year where they have Latin American foods, from every country, from Central America, from South America. I know they help people that come to this area—mostly with helping them find jobs, find homes, or umm—they even have tutoring for children that need to learn English, because they want to go to school, they only speak Spanish.

BT: Do you think OCCHA does enough to help the Hispanic community?

IG: Yes, I believe they do enough with the money that they have.

BT: Okay.

IG: It's like all social agencies... If they had more money, they could do more.

BT: Okay. I heard that you are a lawyer. What type of law do you practice?

IG: I mainly worked for the government. I was in the County Prosecutor's office. I worked in juvenile court and in divorce court for eight years. And then, I worked for the city of Youngstown in its law office. And the last five years I worked for the city of Youngstown, I was the Law Director of the Law Department.

BT: How would you describe a typical day as a lawyer?

IG: The city of Youngstown is in decline. At one time, Youngstown had a population of over 120,000 people. Now, it has about 60,000, because when the factories closed, the city lost all of the money that came from taxes. And the city was very run down. When I started working for the law department, there were not many people working there; [before] there were about twenty people, [but] now there are about ten. Also, many of the things that were done by other departments in the city are now done by the law department. For example, contracting with all the unions that existed in the city. There were 7-8 unions representing the city employees. So every three years, each union, there were 7, had to negotiate new contracts. That's part of what I did—

Citations that were filed against the city. For example, when I worked in the city, the federal government filed a lawsuit against the city because of its wastewater treatment.

BT: Okay.

IG: ...the wastewater that floated through the city, it overflowed. And when it overflowed, well the waste overflowed with it, and the federal government filed a lawsuit against the city. They [the federal government] filed a lawsuit against the city because we had too many people in the county jail and we didn't have enough space for the number of criminals that we had and the federal government filed a

lawsuit against the county. And the county said, “Well, it’s not our fault, it’s Youngstown’s fault because they send too many convicts to the jail,” Oh, it was a lot.

The state changed a law that existed for years and years that said that you had to be a resident [of Youngstown] to work for the city of Youngstown. And that law had existed for years and years. During the time that I was the law director, the state of Ohio decided to change that law. So, we sued the state of Ohio—saying that it wasn’t constitutional under the state of Ohio to change that law.

I would go into work in the mornings and sometimes there were things that had happened over night. For example, a police officer had been in an accident and he had hurt someone—or a police officer went to arrest someone and really hurt him. I don’t know how—I don’t know. There was something new every day.

BT: Okay.

IG: You’d go into the office, [and] there would be a line of people waiting to see you for this problem or that problem. We didn’t have a department to deal with employees—human resources. Every fight between employees and the city or department came to the law department. If—discipline of employees [was needed], it was all done by the law department. We didn’t have enough employees for all the problems we had in the city.

BT: So, you would say it was very stressful?

IG: Yes.

BT: Ok, what was your favorite part of being a lawyer?

IG: The other lawyers are very interesting people. They always had jokes, they had interesting stories, about when they were in court—or clients, you know, who were crazy. Things like that. You know, talking with people that have the same interests [as you].

BT: What does success mean to you?

IG: Surviving all that is going on now. I wasn’t very ambitious. My mom always instilled in me that women must be independent from their spouses because if the marriage doesn’t work out, they have an alternative. They can support themselves. And because of that, I always wanted to pursue some career where I could be independent, and have my own money, my own independence. My marriage turned out well and it hasn’t been necessary. But always in the back of my mind, that is what I wanted to do, to be independent. [I wanted] to do what I wanted to do, not what a man wanted me to do.

My mom didn’t have a choice in if—she had to move here from Puerto Rico. When my father lost his job the first time they were on strike, they went back to Puerto Rico—that was [my father’s] decision. They came back to the US, that was also my father’s decision. When the factory closed and my father wanted to move to Puerto Rico again, my mom had grandchildren here. She didn’t particularly want to go back to Puerto Rico because her family was here, but she went because my father wanted to.

BT: Okay. Let’s see. What or who has contributed to your success?

IG: When I first started school at YSU, I always wanted to go to college, but I graduated from high school and worked for a year, because I didn’t have money to go to college. I didn’t know how to get a

scholarship, it wasn't easy for me. So there was a woman whose name was Josephine Beckett. She worked for Youngstown State University—she took a group of women that came from poorer areas of Youngstown, and she helped us enroll in the university, with all the help she could give, whether she gave us advice, or monetary assistance, whatever. And she was very—she is the person I believe helped me the most to become successful. She died years ago.

BT: Oh, wow. You're retired now, right?

IG: Yes.

BT: Since you have retired, what do you do in your free time?

IG: I am a volunteer for hospice, visiting people that are on their death beds, but not so much now. I did it for six or seven years. Now, [I do it] every once in a while, but not much. But [now], I am volunteering at the Butler Art Museum and I am a docent. I teach all ages about the paintings and the art that is there. I like it a lot—and also we go to Youngstown City Schools and we do a program where we show fourth graders artwork, colors, forms, lines, things like that. And after that, they come to the museum twice a year and we take them through the museum to teach them about the art in this city.

BT: Okay. What are you most proud of?

IG: Oh, wow. [I'm proud of] surviving everything I've been through. I don't know. I'm a decent person, an educated person, someone who likes literature and art—I've been able to travel to Europe. I think I have compassion, and I am a person that, for the most part, likes people. I have friends and people that love me and people that I love too. Things like that.

Like I said, I am not a very ambitious person. I've never expected awards or sought recognition. I am a decent person. I like to treat others as they treat me. And if I've made a difference in the world, it's personal, in personal ways, not something larger than life.

BT: Okay, is that all?

IG: Yeah.

BT: Okay. Thank you for your time and thank you for telling me about your interesting life. Nice meeting you.

IG: Thank you. Thanks for inviting me.

BT: My pleasure.