

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 7

Mary Lou Reyes
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
August 13, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Mary Lou Reyes

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

SUBJECT: Life as a Latin American Immigrant in Youngstown, Ohio¹

DATE: August 13, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Mary Lou Reyes for the project “Latino Voice of the Valley” for Youngstown State University. The interview is on August 13, 2019 at OCCHA [Organización Cívica y Cultural Hispana Americana]. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Mary Lou, how are you?

MR: Hi Brea.

BT: How are you?

MR: Good, and you?

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

MR: I was born here in Youngstown, Ohio.

BT: Mhm.

MR: I was born and raised here.

BT: Where are your parents from?

MR: My parents came from Puerto Rico.

BT: As a child, did you speak mostly Spanish or English at home?

MR: At home, we spoke Spanish. My sister worked and her major was teaching English. My father worked in the steels mills. But when I went to school, I spoke English, and at home, I spoke Spanish.

BT: Why did your parents decide to move here?

MR: Work.

BT: Ok.

MR: My dad—my dad came here to work in the steel mills—

BT: Ok.

¹ Although Mary Lou Reyes is not technically an immigrant because she was born and raised in the United States, she grew up speaking Spanish at home and immersed in Latin American culture.

MR: At Youngstown Sheet and Tube.

BT: Ok. So, did he already know how to speak English when—

MR: No.

BT: No?

MR: No, nothing. He learned English here and also my mom.

BT: So, you learned from your mother?

MR: Yeah, and she learned English with us. We were little and we learned English.

BT: Ok, at any moment, did you feel isolated or as if you were not a part of the community or school for not knowing English?

MR: Yes, because the kids laughed at me because I didn't know English. Also, my color, they believed that I was black, but I am Puerto Rican. But after learning English, I wasn't scared anymore. I didn't let the students bother me.

BT: Ok, did you participate in any activities at school?

MR: Yes. Let's see, how old was I when they had the PTAs. My mom and dad came. They had volleyball, kickball. There weren't many activities when I was little, but on the playground, we played that: kickball and volleyball, jump rope. That's about it.

BT: What school did you attend?

MR: Here on the Southside of Youngstown, I went to Williamson Elementary School and after Williamson School, Junior High, at Hillman High School. And high school was South High.

BT: Ok. Did you feel more integrated at school participating in those activities?

MR: Yes, because I already knew how to speak English and I grew up with friends around the neighborhood. And the school was diverse: Hispanics, Americans—and how do you say it?—African Americans. There was a variety of students.

BT: How do I say it?—How was your childhood in the US?

MR: I was born here and I grew up here. I had problems at first—how do I say it?—discrimination? But I went to school and met people. But when I was little, I experienced discrimination, but after that, it was fine.

BT: Could you tell me about a situation, or an experience with discrimination?

MR: When I started working—after I graduated high school, I started to work for a company and many employees were white, and they [treated] me like they didn't want me there because of the color of my skin. But some made friends with me, we worked together—but still, it's the first time I—well [when I was] younger, but later, in adulthood, you know, I felt like people didn't want me for the color of my skin. But that is their problem, not mine—

BT: Exactly.

MR: But it's like the second time I've experienced discrimination. But that was in the 80s [*laughter*], now it's different.

BT: Have you visited Puerto Rico since you came to the United States?

MR: Yes.

BT: Do you go often?

MR: My parents lived here for forty years. After their last child graduated, they moved back [to Puerto Rico]. In 1978, I graduated. And they lived there until they died. But I used to go every year, and I still go every year to visit my family. I have family [there] from my dad's and my mom's side. I go all the time because of the weather, it depends on when I can go, but I visit Puerto Rico.

BT: Ok, so what do you like most about Puerto Rico?

MR: Well, of course the culture, the language, the food, the family there—many things are modernized. I left Puerto Rico when I was young, so things have changed. I know Puerto Rico has suffered a lot now, but that is what I like, my island.

BT: What do you miss most about Puerto Rico?

MR: Well, the sun, the temperature, the tropical [weather], the beaches, the food—[well, actually] we can cook the food here—but the beaches, the culture and—Puerto Rico is a beautiful island, not like Ohio, so cold.

BT: [*laughter*]. Ok, what Puerto Rican traditions and celebrations do you preserve and still practice here?

MR: Well, my dances, our language, our food. I always practice the culture, the dances, [eat] the food. And you know, I participate in many of the activities that we have here for Latinos and Hispanics here.

BT: So you like to dance?

MR: Yes, I love it.

BT: And what is your favorite dance?

MR: Ah, I like merengue and salsa. But I like merengue more.

BT: What is your favorite Puerto Rican tradition?

MR: My tradition... I am Puerto Rican and I keep my culture alive. My [favorite] traditions are—I celebrate Three Kings' Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, things like that, parties. We attend many things at the church. Those are the traditions I still practice, yeah.

BT: What traditions did your parents practice that you don't?

MR: No, I still practice all of them—yes, all of them. I haven't stopped [practicing] any. What they've taught us is our culture and traditions. I carry them on. I live here and was born here, but I still practice all of my traditions.

BT: How do you define family?

MR: Family, family is important—love, passion, respect. Yeah, family, love, respect, tradition. That’s about it.

BT: Who do you consider family?

MR: Well, my father, my mother—but they aren’t here now—my siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, and sometimes, I have friends that I have known for a long time... and so they are family. I know I can trust them, and count on them for anything that may happen in my life.

BT: What is your favorite Puerto Rican dish?

MR: My favorite dish—arroz blanco y habichuelas [white rice and beans]. Red beans. I love them—and sometimes Steak and Onions [*laughter*]

BT: Let’s see. Do you know how to cook Puerto Rican food?

MR: Yes, I grew up—my mother taught me when I was ten years old. I started learning to cook, to prepare food, to prepare different meats and sofritos [a Puerto Rican sauce], all types of food. Everything stays here [*points to her head*]. I don’t have to write a recipe down. [*laughter*]

BT: [*laughter*] What does community mean to you?

MR: Well, to me, community means—if I live in a community, I want to know who lives in my community, regardless of the race. How do you say “share” [in Spanish]?

BT: Compartir.

MR: Share, respect, be friends, that everyone in that community looks out for one another, respects one another and also helps one another out with their families and children. That is the meaning of community.

BT: How have you contributed to your community?

MR: Ooh, [I’ve done] so much. So, I was born and raised here. My first job was as a teenager at OCCHA. After I graduated, after high school, I came and I did volunteer [work]—I worked at OCCHA. I volunteered at United Way. I’m interested in—not the drug programs—but sober houses, I help [with that]. I help the homeless—give out food sometimes. But I do give back to the community. Those that helped me as a child, as a teenager, I give back to them. I help out in the community—with what interests me though, not everything.

BT: Ok, why did you decide to become the director of OCCHA?

MR: Ok [*laughter*], well the history of my OCCHA—I started as a teenager in 1974, and I was one of the first employees at the age of 18 years old. After that, I went to college. And after that, I worked for Girl Scouts; I worked thirty years there. After I retired in 2008, my father was sick, [so] I took care of him. I moved and my mother already died. I moved to Puerto Rico, I took care of him, and then [my father] died. And I wasn’t doing anything. I didn’t have a job, nothing. Then one day, I met with the president [of OCCHA] and she asked me, “Mary Lou, what are you doing?” And I told her, “I’m retired.” “Well, I’m looking for a director.” I said, “Well, let me check something.” I was the director of Girl Scouts, but it was an honor because after forty years, my life has come full circle. I started out here as a teenager and then I [eventually] became the director of OCCHA.

But they're my people. OCCHA is an agency that offers services to Hispanics, Latinos and many other cultures, anyone that needs help. So, how do I say it? It's from the heart. So I've been the director here for 5 years, so let's see what happens in the next five years [laughter].

BT: What's your favorite part about your job?

MR: The people.

BT: Getting to know everyone: the youth, babies, adults—helping so that they can help one another. It's important that we help them so they can help themselves.

BT: Could you tell me about some of the activities at OCCHA?

MR: Well, activities we have—let's start with what we do throughout the year. In January, we always celebrate Three Kings' Day. It's for children ages one to thirteen. Then, there is the International Food Fest; we did that in July of this year. It introduces the community to Latino food, all Latin American food: Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican, Peruvian, Spain. Many families live here, and they make the food and we sell it. The next activity, the Scholarship Program. The Scholarship Program provides scholarships to high school students that want to go to college. After, there is the gala—OCCHA's gala. That is in November. It's going to be in Stambaugh Auditorium. It's a very big gala, and it makes us a lot of money for the programs at OCCHA. After that, we also have the Veteran's Appreciation Dinner. It's for Latino, Hispanic veterans that have dedicated their lives to serving in the military. And after that, there's the annual meeting for members of OCCHA in December. And every three months, we have—what's it called?—"Know Your Numbers" Health Screening. We invite those that need to check their blood pressure, cholesterol and that sort of thing with Mercy Health. Also, sometimes, about two or three times a year, we have—what's it called—Health Series. We introduced three more: so in addition, [we check for] anxiety, depression, suicide, and the other one, we have breast cancer and legal matters. So quarterly, we have health screenings.

And then, every day, we have people that need food and clothing. We also have two Alta Head Start classes for the little ones. We have Zumba every Friday. This September, if everything goes well, we will have ESL classes. We are also going to try to get GED classes, because if someone needs to take the exam in Spanish, then they can take it. Then, they can get their GED degree to be able to move up in the world since many people need a GED for work. There are so many activities at OCCHA.

BT: Which activities have helped the Hispanic community the most?

MR: Well, the services. Many of the services we do—job references, legal matters, immigration, clothing, food—especially after Hurricane Maria, and the other one, what's it called—the one in Houston, Texas—many people moved here. So, many references—houses that people need, food, and clothes. Mostly, the food, but the services, they are important.

BT: So, is OCCHA an international organization, or is it only in Ohio?

MR: Local, the Mahoning Valley only, not Ohio. There are other organizations in Cleveland, Lorain, Toledo, Akron, but OCCHA is only in this area. [It covers] the counties of Mahoning, Trumbull, Columbiana, and Ashtabula—these areas only, locally. We started in 1972, I'll give you a brochure, I have two.

BT: Ok. What do you appreciate most about the Hispanic community?

MR: We are diverse.

MR: I am Puerto Rican, but I love the Mexican community. I've tried Dominican food—but the diversity in our Hispanic community [is what I appreciate the most].

BT: In your opinion, what do all Hispanic countries have in common?

MR: The language.

BT: The language, anything else?

MR: No. We have the language, the food, the dances. We are different in many ways but I believe mostly in the language. But also, how do you say enrich, enrichment [in Spanish]? I don't know how to say that in Spanish.

BT: [laughter]

MR: It's all beautiful. We speak Spanish, but we have our language, our different foods and music. But we are unique.

BT: Do you prefer to speak English or Spanish?

MR: Spanish.

BT: Spanish?

MR: Because I don't want to forget it. I can speak English all day, but if I don't practice my language, I'll lose it because I live here. If I lived in Puerto Rico. I would speak it all the time, or in certain areas where they always speak Spanish like Cleveland and Lorain. I know when I came home from school, I spoke Spanish. I am thankful for that. I was born and raised here in Youngstown and I can lose it. I believe with any language, if you don't use it, you lose it. So, I prefer to speak Spanish.

BT: In your opinion, how has the Hispanic community changed throughout the years?

MR: Well, I think—what I've noticed is the language. If I, as a mother, don't practice [the language] with my son and if my son has a—if I have grandchildren—if we don't continue teaching our children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and great great grandchildren living here, we are going to lose everything.

BT: In your opinion, how will it change in the future?

MR: Hopefully, we will continue practicing our culture, our language, and the following generations will keep it alive. Hopefully, that happens. I know it can happen. Not everyone is like that, but I believe if we do that, we will never forget our culture or language [or] what matters.

BT: What is your biggest accomplishment?

MR: My biggest accomplishment—that I grew up here in Ohio. My parents came and sacrificed. They came here, I was born here for a better life. Well, I don't know—when I was younger, when I was born, I don't know what was happening in Puerto Rico. I was born in 1955. I went to the university—I was the

only one in my family to do that—I had a child, a family. And thank the Lord that I have a life that I enjoy. One day, I am going to retire. Ahh, that's good, anything else?

BT: No, thank you for taking time to help me, to do this interview. Thank you for your help in general, for helping me find people, everything.

MR: Oh, you're welcome. It will be a pleasure to see your project. I also want to tell you that you speak Spanish very well.

BT: Thank you.

MR: *[laughter]* You're welcome.

BT: Nice to meet you.

MR: Nice to meet you too.

[shakes hands]