

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 8

Consuelo Mendez
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
August 14, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Consuelo Mendez

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

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

DATE: August 14, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Dr. Consuelo Mendez for the project "Latino Voices of the Valley" for Youngstown State University. The interview is on August 14, 2019. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Consuelo, how are you?

CM: Hi Bre, I'm fine.

BT: Ok. Where were you born?

CM: I was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

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

CM: I was nine years old.

BT: Nine years old. Why did your family decide to come to the United States?

CM: [Because of] the political situation in the Dominican Republic. At that time, there was a civil war and my parents didn't feel safe and that is why we immigrated to New York.

BT: Ok. You are from the Dominican Republic, so why did you attend high school and college in Puerto Rico?

CM: When we left the Dominican Republic, we went to New York. It was my parents, my sister and I. My parents were professionals, but they didn't speak English. So, for that reason, we stayed just a year in New York. From there, we moved to Puerto Rico, and at the time, I started college there and so that's where I was.

BT: Have you visited the Dominican Republic since arriving in the United States?

CM: Yes.

BT: Ok. Do you visit often?

CM: Not as often as I would like. The last time [I went] was about four years ago.

BT: What do you usually do when you visit?

CM: We have family [there] who we visit frequently. We spend a lot of time with our family, but we also travel around the island to become more familiar with it and enjoy it.

BT: So what is your favorite place in the Dominican Republic?

CM: La Romana. It's very pretty.

BT: When you came to the United States, did you experience culture shock?

CM: The first time I came to the United States, I was no older than nine years old, so yes. It was a very tough experience, very different. Something I wasn't used to was the temperature. We came here in the dead of winter, in January. And I'll never forget when I opened the door at the airport and I was super cold. I didn't have a coat. I definitely won't forget that experience.

The language was very challenging. I didn't speak English. It was very difficult being in school because I didn't speak English. My friends were normally Latino children, and they didn't necessarily come from good families—most of the children weren't well-behaved. So, that was my circle. Academically, though, I progressed quickly; I learned the language quickly. But yeah, the language was a challenge.

I had an experience here at school, during recess, the kids would really give it to me... I don't know why. So, I also had that bad experience. Also, the lack of family—we came from another... we left all of our family behind in the Dominican Republic and we were used to living near family. From that moment on, we found ourselves, you know, in a totally strange place, living in those building. When I would go to school and come home, nobody would be there waiting for me, etc. That, too, was a little difficult.

BT: And in Puerto Rico, did you experience culture shock?

CM: No, not really, because when we arrived in Puerto Rico, the climate was our climate, and the environment was very similar to that of the Dominican Republic. And we spoke Spanish, so we felt comfortable and secure again. There wasn't much adjustment like there was when we came to New York.

BT: What Dominican traditions or celebrations do you preserve and still practice here?

CM: I think the food for the most part. Yeah, I try to cook many of our Latino dishes. I'm lucky to say that in Youngstown, we can get practically all the products we need. Anyways, I have gotten my children used to eating our food. Also, the music—yeah, we have music all the time, a lot of it is Latin music. The way that our family is very close. The way that my children grew up with their grandparents, with my parents. Family values, we also try to preserve those as well.

BT: What is your favorite Dominican tradition or celebration?

CM: Maybe, Three Kings' Day. We celebrate it on January 6th. To me, it was nice. One of the things I had to adjust to was the fact that in the United States, after December 24th, 25th, everything ends, whereas for us Latinos, well, that is when everything begins. So in January, it's the combination of the Epiphany and Three King's Day. Yeah, I try to keep that tradition around, so yeah, we put some gifts under the tree—and the kids, when they were little, they still believed in the Wisemen.

BT: What traditions did your parents practice that you do not anymore?

CM: I think I've tried to continue almost everything more or less. Yeah, I can't think of anything specific.

BT: Ok, that's fine. Do you have children?

CM: I have five.

BT: Ok. What traditions did you practice that your children do not?

CM: Speaking the language. When they were little—because they grew up mostly with my parents—they didn't go to daycare, none of that, and so, they were used to speaking mostly in Spanish. But, once they started school, they didn't [speak Spanish] anymore. I would have loved it if they were completely bilingual, but in reality, they aren't. I would have liked to keep [that tradition], or be more active in making them learn Spanish one hundred percent. Yes, they do know a lot [of Spanish], but not at the level that I would like.

BT: Do your children know how to cook Dominican food?

CM: Some of them, yes.

BT: Could you describe some differences between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico?

CM: Yes. Mostly the language. In the Dominican Republic, we only speak Spanish, whereas in Puerto Rico, well its bilingual, being an American territory. The people are a little more mixed. The people have all different complexions, from white to dark, because of its proximity to Haiti. Well, most people are mixed and there isn't a huge difference between one race and another.

The music is mostly merengue. The food, despite being very similar in some aspects, it's also very different. And the fact that Puerto Rico is much more Americanized than the Dominican Republic.

BT: Ok. Do you identify more with Dominican or American culture?

CM: I would say that fundamentally, yes, I feel more Dominican because of how I was raised, for family values, religion, for who I am. In terms of my daily life, my life right now, well, I identify more with my American life. I like order, I like how things are run here. So, it would be difficult for me to go back to the Dominican Republic to live, because I like the structure and the laws here.

BT: Ok. When do you feel more Dominican than American?

CM: Maybe, during certain celebrations: family celebrations, special occasions, celebrations that involve our music and food, mostly in that category. Anything that has to do with family. Because we are closer to our families, we feel more responsible for our parents and our grandparents. That is how I raised my children. I raised them more as Dominicans than Americans.

BT: Ok. Do you still have a lot of contact with the Hispanic community?

CM: In the United States?

BT: Yes.

CM: Oh yes, definitely. You know that I am a doctor and I have an enormous community of Hispanic patients. And because of them, I've definitely stayed in touch with our culture.

BT: What do you miss most about the Dominican Republic?

CM: My family, the environment, the weather, the beaches [*laughter*].

BT: What is your favorite Dominican food?

CM: Mangú.

BT: Ok. Do you prefer to speak English or Spanish?

CM: It depends. If it's socially, probably Spanish. With family, I prefer to speak Spanish. Professionally, because I went to an American school, in my office, I probably prefer English, because I was trained in English.

BT: Why did you decide to become a doctor?

CM: I always knew I wanted to be a doctor. I never imagined myself doing anything else. When I was three or four years old, I already knew that is what I wanted to be. Maybe my mother was a positive influence. She was a pharmacist and her dream had always been to go to medical school, but she couldn't. So, she decided to be a pharmacist. I remember that, every once in a while, when I was at the pharmacy with her, medicine always intrigued me and I was drawn to it. Ever since I was little, I knew what I wanted to do.

BT: Ok, so how is your life different from what you imagined?

CM: How is it different? I think it's a lot busier than I could have imagined. There's a lot more work than I could have imagined. Basically, it's that.

BT: What challenges did you face, or do you face at work?

CM: *[laughter]* The changes that have happened in medicine. Not so much the medicine per se, but the political changes, administrative changes—the difficulty of doing that, of many of the communities toward medical treatment, the volume of patients, the time that we have available to do everything that we have to do, the time that you have to invest that doesn't necessarily involve taking care of patients, but rather *[involves]* phone calls, documentation, computers, etcetera, etcetera. In all honesty, it takes away time that I would like to dedicate, in person, to my patients. But there are so many things that—so, I don't have enough time to do what I'd like to do, which is take care of my patients.

BT: What is your favorite part of this job?

CM: Sitting face to face with my patients and listening to them and feeling that I have made a positive change in their lives. And when they return, they tell me that they appreciate me and they tell me that I've done something for them. I love that—

BT: Ok.

CM: ...The relationships that develop when you have had the same patients for years and years. That means a lot to us *[doctors]*.

BT: What do you appreciate most about the United States?

CM: The opportunity that has been given to us. Understand that I came here when I was nine years old *[and]* I knew no English; my family didn't know any English. And I feel that *[the US]* has opened many doors for us. I believe here, as they say it, the sky is the limit when you are determined. *[I also appreciate]* the diversity and the opportunities.

BT: Ok. Why did you decide to return to the United States after going to Puerto Rico to study?

CM: When I finished medical school, I wanted to apply for my medical residency in internal medicine. One of the places I applied to was St. Elizabeth in Youngstown. I met someone who had worked there, and they recommended it to me. And so, when I came for the interview, I got accepted. And that's how I ended up in Youngstown.

BT: Ok. What do you like least about the United States?

CM: Maybe it's that we live such busy lives. We work too much [and] we do things in such a hurry. When you go somewhere else, like Europe or Latin America, you realize that they have a different lifestyle. Everything is at a slower pace; they enjoy their day to day life more, they take long vacations. They don't work twelve to twenty hours a day. Everything is at a slower pace.

BT: [It's] more relaxed.

CM: A lot more relaxed, yes. They know how to enjoy themselves more. We are completely—constantly busy. We are realizing that life goes by [and] we will eventually look back and [notice] that we did nothing but work and work and work. I think it's that kind of life.

BT: Have you experienced discrimination?

CM: Thank God I don't think I have. I was lucky to have been raised by a woman who was ahead of her time. She was very independent, very intelligent, and very educated. She studied pharmacy at a time when women didn't even go to school. She only had two children [daughters]. So, she raised us in a way in which we were also independent, with a strong character; and she always told us to study, and that our work would take us to where we wanted to go. I have always thought that. She never taught us that we were a minority. I'd never heard of the word minority until I came here. I never considered myself a minority. I always thought I was equal to everyone else. And I don't know, I guess that helps too. When I first came here, understand that I was at St. Elizabeth and worked with a group of twelve residents. I believe each of us was from a different place. I mean, I never considered myself different from or inferior to anyone else. And I believe that I did a great job as a resident and I am a good doctor. I believe I am fortunate that I haven't experienced that type of situation, but I know that it exists. But so far, I don't think [I've been discriminated against].

BT: Ok. I've heard that you participate in the organization OCCHA [Organización Cívica y Cultural Hispana Americana]. Could you tell me about some of the activities in OCCHA?

CM: OCCHA is a great organization in the Latin American community of Youngstown. It has been here for more than forty-five years. It tries to help not only the Latin American community, but any community that needs help. We are trying to fill the—how do I say it?—the void that other organizations haven't been able to fill in the Latin American community. So, we do a variety of things. We offer translation services, mostly for medical and psychiatric appointments. We offer English classes for Latinos that have arrived, and not just in the language, but also the culture. We offer childcare services. We offer—we help fill out tax forms. We serve as an access point to other services in the community. When a Latino arrives here, they don't know where to go. So, we give referrals, we put up information about where to go. We have health fairs two to three times a year. We have connections with St. Elizabeth or Mercy [Health]. They come to OCCHA many times a year and they offer free lab services and other medical services. There is also an event in which they hand out food. I believe once a month—it could be more—

but at least once a month, they hand out food. Also, they give away clothes. But in general, [they offer] many services. It's a very good organization.

BT: Ok. How have you participated in OCCHA?

CM: In OCCHA, I was a general member for years. And about six or eight years ago, I became a part of the Board. Also, three years ago, I became the president of the Board, [actually] I was vice-president and then president for two years, that is the term of the presidency. Now, I am just a Board member again. I believe I have one or two years left as a Board member.

BT: What are you most proud of?

CM: In general?

BT: Yes.

CM: [*laughter*] I'd say two things: my family and my career.

BT: Ok. Well, thank you for making time to do this interview with me. Thank you for helping me with this project, and nice to meet you.

CM: Thank you, Bre. Thank you for the interview. Thank you for being interested in the Latino community.

BT: My pleasure.

[*They shake hands*]