

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

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LVV 9

Victor Arcenio
Interview
By
Brea Tinsley
On
August 15, 2019

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INTERVIEWEE: Victor Arcenio

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

SUBJECT: Life as a Latin American Immigrant

DATE: August 15, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Victor Arcenio for the project “Latino Voices of the Valley” for Youngstown State University. This interview is on August 15, 2019 at the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Victor, how are you?

VA: Hi.

BT: Hi, nice to meet you.

VA: Nice to meet you [too], Brea.

BT: How are you?

VA: Great.

BT: Where were you born?

VA: I was born in Lima, Peru.

BT: Lima, Peru. How old were you when you immigrated to the United States?

VA: [I was] old enough to decide to discover new horizons.

BT: Ok. [*laughter*] Why did you decide to come to the United States?

VA: I came by chance. They gave me a visa. So, I was visiting other countries and then I said, “Well, since I can go to the United States, I’m going to visit the United States.”

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

VA: Maybe. The cities are designed so similarly, compared to Peru. You can tell just by looking at a photo of Peru which city it is. Here, everything looks the same. There isn’t much—

BT: All the buildings look—

VA: Yes. There isn’t much variation.

BT: Ok, did you have trouble with the language?

VA: At first, yes, because I assumed that I understood it well enough, but actually my conversation skills were very basic, and I did have trouble because I didn’t understand it.

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

VA: Right now, it's a mixture of both. Since my daughter lives here, I have to learn about the American way of life and Peruvian culture.

BT: Ok. What Peruvian celebrations or traditions do you preserve and still practice here?

VA: In the US, I generally—what I used to do before was typical Peruvian dances, Peruvian food, and teach about Peruvian culture in fairs, such as Canfield Fair, for example.

BT: Mmm, ok. What traditions did your parents practice that you no longer practice?

VA: I am a Catholic so we always had traditions of going to church on the holidays. Those religious traditions from Peru, they are different. They don't exist here even for Catholics; it's just not the same. That is what—the way we celebrate religious traditions.

BT: [Are there] any more examples?

VA: The celebrations at school as well. [In Peru], they celebrate Mother's Day, Father's Day, Children's Day, Family Day—things that I don't see celebrated here.

BT: Do you have children?

VA: Yes, I have a seventeen-year-old daughter.

BT: Ok, and what traditions did you practice that your daughter doesn't?

VA: I practiced in Peru—I think it's related to the question of religion, religious celebrations, school celebrations; they are very different in Peru. Obviously, we try to find ways to celebrate [them] in the United States. But, that is what we no longer practice here.

BT: Ok. Do you speak Spanish at home?

VA: I've talked to my daughter in Spanish since she was born. So, that is something I don't want her to lose, knowing Castilian. We call Castilian what you would call Spanish, but it's all the same. So yes, I try to get her to keep practicing the language.

BT: Do you still eat Peruvian food?

VA: Since my daughter went to Peru and likes the food, I've found myself forced to learn to cook Peruvian food.

BT: Ok.

VA: And if I can get the ingredients and I prepare [it], and my daughter gives me a bit of help, if she likes it, it is very good.

BT: Ok. What are some typical dishes in Peru?

VA: Peru has an enormously varied cuisine. It's one of the two-three countries in the world [that] I think has the highest quality and most varied gastronomy. There are lots of dishes, but the most popular ones are probably ceviche, more the [version made of] fish...

BT: Yeah.

VA: “Lomo saltado” [stir fried beef tenderloin], “carne picada” [chopped beef], stew, “la causa” [layered potato casserole]. There are so many dishes. But it’s one of my favorites.

BT: What is your favorite Peruvian dish?

VA: My favorite, choosing between all of them, I think it’s Pachamanca. Pachamanca is a combination of chicken and meat, and it’s all cooked underground. It has a very pleasing flavor.

BT: Wow! Do you think you’ve lost some of your Peruvian identity by living here?

VA: I don’t think so, because I keep practicing some traditions with Hispanic or Peruvian friends. We keep enjoying our typical dishes. And when there are opportunities, I participate in Peruvian dances or [sing] Peruvian songs. So, I believe we are keeping the tradition alive and I don’t believe I’ve lost my Peruvian identity.

BT: Ok, that’s good.

VA: [*laughter*]

BT: And do you still have contact with the Hispanic community?

VA: Yes, [with] my friends or organizations in the community.

BT: When do you feel most integrated in the Hispanic community?

VA: There are public events where there is Hispanic participation and I like to go to them to basically help out. If someone doesn’t understand English very well, that is when I try to help.

BT: Ok. Could you tell me about the school system in Peru when you lived there?

VA: The school system in Peru, well, it’s a year less than in the United States, but in Peru, there are five years for college, while here in the United States, it’s only four.

BT: So, the time [overall] spent studying is the same.

VA: You could say that.

BT: Ok. What are the differences between the education system when you were a student and when you started to teach in Peruvian schools?

VA: I went to a really big school. It’s the first national school of Peru—10,000 students at that time. A classroom had sixty students, one teacher. It was all boys. So, there was always respect for the teacher, you didn’t see a lack of discipline; when the teacher spoke, everyone was quiet, paying attention to the lesson. The change would be that classrooms or the number of students have decreased. Now they are smaller, twenty, twenty-five, something like that. And I worked in a private school, well private schools are disciplined too. So, I always saw the same respect as there was when I went to school. Maybe lately in Peru, when I was teaching in Peru, there was more emphasis on the academic level, it was a bit more advanced.

BT: Ok. For example, in the United States, there is elementary school, middle school and high school. So, is it the same in Peru or it is different?

VA: We call Kindergarten “inicial”. Elementary school is until sixth grade. In the United States, there is elementary, and then middle school. Well, in Peru, elementary school ends here, and then there is high school, from first to fifth. And high school is from ninth to twelfth. We have a year more and here in the United States, there is a year less.

BT: Ok.

VA: But it’s similar.

BT: What was your favorite part about teaching?

VA: In the United States?

BT: In general.

VA: In general? I think a teacher always is always pleased when a student, after many years, greets and thanks you for teaching them, or they say, “Remember when you used to teach me, remember?” So, that’s very gratifying.

BT: So why did you decide to teach?

VA: I come from a family of educators: my uncles and aunts, my siblings, my mother—my mom, since she was ten, knew she wanted to be a teacher, so I was always in education. I always liked to help people be successful in life.

BT: Ok. What does education mean to you?

VA: Education is a process. It’s like having a precious stone that isn’t sculpted or polished. It’s a great and brute value. So, education is taking this stone with no beauty yet and polishing it as best you can so that it shines on its own. So, the student would have to shine on their own, with all the education received and help from the school teachers.

BT: What do you miss most about Peru?

VA: For sure, my family. Of course, my daughter keeps me balanced. Yeah, that.

BT: Ok. Have you experienced discrimination?

VA: To be honest, no. Many people have asked me [and] I say, “I’ve never noticed.” If there was, I’ve never noticed it. It could be that sometimes I don’t like to see the negative side of things. It could be that.

BT: I’ve heard that you participated in OCCHA [Organización Cívica y Cultural Hispana Americana]. Could you tell me about some of the activities there?

VA: OCCHA has a calendar, where different activities are planned. So, there is a group of young adults, there is a Three Kings’ Day celebration, there is a food festival, there is a gala dinner. Those are some activities. Yes, I participate, I help with all or some of the events.

BT: How have you participated in OCCHA?

VA: I am part of the committee where they talk about or discuss some possibilities and how to improve the services [offered by] OCCHA, how to organize—there are committees within this group, and they talk about how one can help.

BT: I've heard that you were a part of the Peruvian Air Force. Could you describe your experience in the Air Force?

VA: Salute first. [*Salutes like a soldier*] [*laughter*]

BT: [*laughter*]

VA: The—my experience in the Air Force was very good. I loved being part of the Air Force. I worked as an air traffic controller.

BT: And how was a typical day?

VA: A typical day at work—I got up early, not too early, but to be on time. As an air traffic controller, I had to go to the control tower, check the flight plans, the schedules, check the services for fire prevention, ambulance, mechanic, that everything was in its place and that there were no new developments. And when a flight would arrive, I would get in contact with the plane and from the first contact until the plane landed, that was my job—or if the plane took off... before it took off, we would also track the pilot until he passed over to another traffic control area.

BT: What challenges did you face in the job?

VA: The English language. There are planes that came from the US and I had to talk to them or say something in English. But I learned a little English and so, I would try to talk to them or provide a service in English. I think that was the challenge.

BT: Ok, how long did you take to learn English?

VA: I'm still learning it...

BT: Ok.

VA: ...because I am always learning a new word and—or my daughter comes with a new expression in English and I say, "What does that mean?" And so, everyday I continue to learn.

BT: Ok, amongst all the cultures in the United States, what makes the Hispanic community unique?

VA: Now it seems to me that Hispanic culture, in general, is happier, more expressive, we are more loving; we hug, kiss, and—I don't know, we are more, umm, extroverted in a way, compared to here—the people here sometimes keep a distance and don't express many emotions sometimes.

BT: Yes. I agree, I absolutely agree. What are you most proud of?

VA: I'd say, besides my daughter, [I'm proud of] being a teacher and seeing that my students are excelling in life. As a teacher, I've had many students that always thank me when [they see me] in the street and they remember me and that is always pleasing.

BT: Ok, it that all?

VA: Mhm.

BT: Ok. *[laughter]*. Thank you for taking the time to do this interview with me, and nice meeting you.

VA: Now I'll give you a hug, thank you. *[laughter]*

[They hug each other]