

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
GM LORDSTOWN

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O.H. 2013

Frank Ocasio
Interview
By
Kristina M. Murphy
On
May 14, 2001

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INTERVIEWEE: Frank Ocasio

INTERVIEWER: Kristina M. Murphy

SUBJECT: GM Lordstown

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KM: This is Kristina Murphy doing an interview for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program and the Center for Working Class Studies. This project is funded by the Ford Foundation. Today is Monday, May 14, 2001. It's 7:00 P.M. in the evening, and I'm here today with Mr. Frank Ocasio. I would like to thank Mr. Ocasio for coming here today and allowing me to interview him for this project. Were you born in Youngstown?

FO: I was born in Youngstown, in a little town called Brier Hill. Lived there for a year.

KM: What year was that, what date and year?

FO: That had to be back in 1953 when I was born. We lived there for a year and then we went to the South Side of Youngstown. That had to be, I was in kindergarten, so that would be five years later, we lived on Erie Street. From there we went to where I'm presently at now, my mother's presently now, on East Side on Bruce St.

KM: And your parents came to Youngstown?

FO: My father Francisco and my mother Evangelita came in from Puerto Rico, because he went to college, she was just done with high school. He graduated from college in 1951, and I think right after that he came here.

KM: Where did he graduate from college at?

FO: He went to school (inaudible) he went there for accounting and typing.

KM: They came to Youngstown, what kind of work did they do?

FO: When my dad first came here, he told me he came from Loraine, OH, and he tried to get a job in the factory there, the steel mills there, but they were already overpopulated. They told him to come to Youngstown, and he and his one buddy came, today he is my godfather, and they came here to Youngstown and found jobs at Sheet and Tube.

KM: How many siblings do you have?

FO: Siblings? Brothers and sister, I have eight sisters and myself, and I am the oldest.

KM: Nine children all together?

FO: Nine children.

KM: Where did you attend school?

FO: I went to East High School, and right from graduation I went to GM, I should have went to school like my daddy told me. (laughing)

KM: What year did you graduate from high school?

FO: 69'.

KM: 69' and where did you go to grade school at?

FO: Grade school, I went to Lincoln, Lincoln School, right across the street from my mom's. That's where I went and from Lincoln I went to East.

KM: What was school like? Did you like school?

FO: School was a lot of fun back in them days. It wasn't like today, just more fun. Today with all the problems they have, it wasn't like that. If we had a fight over there the next day you were buying the kid an ice cream or a pop. So it was a better time. Better time for our schools.

KM: What was it like growing up? You grew up then mostly on the East Side?

FO: It was not too bad, because I had a bunch of sisters to spoil me. Right out of high school, like I said, I went right to General Motors. I was always working, even when I was in high school. I ended up working, my first job I think it was, Lincoln Oles Car Wash. Car washes didn't exist, I was just over, is that what you call it, at the, where they sell the fruits and all that.

KM: Four Seasons?

FO: That was it, Four Seasons, I looked over there and the car wash is gone.

KM: That whole end.

FO: Yeah it's gone. From there I was still in high school, and I was working for Electric Equipment on Market Street.

KM: What did you do there?

FO: Worked on small engines.

KM: Did you learn that in school, or did you just pick that up?

FO: Being a grease monkey, with motorcycles and mini bikes I knew a lot about engines on my own.

KM: When did you get married?

FO: Got married in 1972, to my beautiful wife Miladys, matter of fact it will be my anniversary, thirty years May 20.

KM: How many kids do you have?

FO: I have three daughters, Amy-28 Malinda-22, and Daisy-18, and two sons, Frank-12 and Nelson-9. Their ages are from twenty-eight to nine.

KM: And no grandkids?

FO: No grandkids.

KM: And where do you live at now?

FO: Right now I live on Parkside in Boardman. Kids all go to Boardman High School, three already graduated from Boardman High School, and two are at YSU.

KM: So the jobs you mentioned already were the first jobs you had? For GM?

FO: Yeah, there were jobs, they were getting like penny enny jobs, you know stuff that kids do today. To do what they had to do, we had that too back in our day.

KM: Do you have any family back in Puerto Rico still?

FO: Yeah, I have my mother's side. Her sisters, and we visit them we go over there once every three years, and I also have my in-laws over there. They just left about ten years ago.

KM: They went back or?

FO: Yeah they were regularly from Puerto Rico, they came here they married all seven daughters, and they went back.

KM: So your wife is one of seven daughters?

FO: Yes, so every time we need a vacation spot we have a place to go. Cuamo.

KM: Cuamo?

FO: Cuamo, Puerto Rico.

KM: So what is actually your seniority date? When did you exactly get hired at GM?

FO: 07-23-70. July 7.

KM: What department did you start in?

FO: Well I went, we did our interviews and they write, that same day after you were qualified to work. They ask how many people would like to work today, or start tomorrow in the Paint Department? I was just happy I got hired so I raised my hand, but that next day they didn't put me in paint I ended up in trim. In the trim area.

KM: What was that like?

FO: Terrible.

KM: Terrible? What did you do there?

FO: I crawled in the car and laid flat on my back on the metal car with no rugs, no nothing, no insulation. Just a metal painted car. I had to lay backwards and and shoot a (inaudible) up in the air in to the consol. And you had to do the job, you had a ninety day trial, to see how good you work, and they always put you at the worst jobs to see if you could handle it.

KM: Did you work several different jobs there in the beginning?

FO: No, because when you first start off you try to keep your mouth shut, now today these kids are in there today there like unbelievable. Because their fathers got them in they think they think they got somebody to protect them all the time. Back then in those days I didn't have a father working there, nobody, you could do your job

or you might have lost your job.

KM: What other areas did you work in?

FO: Then they transferred me when they had a down flow with the cars, we had to go to trucks, that's what they most; cars and trucks. Truck plant. That's when I went to paint. Then we they cut, the other shift, I was able to come back. They usually transfer you from department to the same department, and that's why I ended up in paint.

KM: And how many years over all do you think?

FO: Out of all the thirty years I've been in the plant, I've probably been twenty-eight in paint.

KM: Can you describe what a typical day is then for you in the paint department?

FO: A typical day in the paint department is consistent. So a lot of work. You start off in the worst jobs in paint until, you have three departments, the seal side, the prime side, and the finish side. You don't get to the finish until you got about thirty years, that's where I'm at now.

KM: OK.

FO: The seal side was very constrict work. I mean you turn around and the next car was waiting for you. It was tough work.

KM: Did you have to, what shift did you work? Did you work the same shift or were you on different shifts?

FO: Back in them days you worked closing down, closing shifts and doing it you ended up working different shift. I worked mostly, back then it was only two shifts. It was either first or second.

KM: And did that have an effect on your family life constantly changing?

FO: Yeah, it had an effect. I ended up, probably ended up getting sick very often.

KM: Really?

FO: Yeah, your body is not made to work at night. Your so used to it on daytime.

KM: Right, have working conditions changed over time?

FO: In the plant?

KM: Yeah.

FO: Oh yeah, not to last fifteen, no about the last seven years the working conditions, they've done a lot for people that are having problems with rheumatism, they making it easier, getting jobs set up where you don't really hurt yourself as much as you used to. In fact the other day there putting seats every day, you would pick them up and get to be an old man. That would hurt your hands, your back. Today they got a machine that picks it up, while you guide it in.

KM: They said technology has changed in that's effected your job?

FO: Oh yeah it's changed the last seven years big time. It was really for, cause they have found out in the last twenty to twenty five years all the serious injuries people receive, well not receive, like regular injuries from doing the same job over and over.

KM: Repetitive.

FO: Yeah, they end up with some kind of problem.

KM: So do you think it made the job easier or harder or?

FO: I think they just made it easier for themselves, this way people can do the job without hurting themselves anymore. Without going on sick leave or anything like that.

KM: All the different problems that deal with repetitiveness?

FO: Yes, they were just trying to figure out why is this happening? And they thought it was just because people wanted to be on sick leave, but it was proof document by doctors that these people had serious injuries. Today they either retire because of their injuries; can't work no more.

KM: Is there a lot of Puerto Ricans, or Hispanics in general, hired when you were hired?

FO: There was four hundred I think.

KM: Four hundred?

FO: Roughly. Back when I started there was ten thousand of us.

KM: Ok, so there was four hundred out of ten thousand?

FO: Yeah. Now there is only two hundred or less.

KM: Really?

FO: Yeah.

KM: Do you, is that any kind of difference working there being Hispanic or?

FO: No difference.

KM: Did you socialize with people you worked with outside the plant?

FO: Yes.

KM: Was it company sponsored, union sponsored, or personal activities?

FO: Personal, I sometimes go out for a drink or just meet somebody. I end up going to their weddings after a while, because everybody got married at the time I started. Everybody's back in the seventies was eighteen-year-old kids, still lived at home, and took a day off whenever they felt like it.

KM: So after work for example, did you go to Bill's Place or where there other places?

FO: Bill's, everywhere, wherever there was a bar, where everybody met we went. Pink Elephant was one of them, no longer now, is on Mahoning Ave. the bar called Seven Mile Inn, I thought we clicked back. (laughing) Yeah then they had (inaudible) Pub, it was right behind on 45, where everybody used to go from the plant.

KM: In Lordstown?

FO: In Lordstown yeah. North Jacksonville.

KM: I appreciate you remembering that place. How did you feel about working at GM?

FO: I felt pretty good, because it was a good place to work at the time. At that time a lot of people weren't going into school right away, because there was good paying jobs, and you were able to get out of school and almost sign up in one day, and the next day you would be hired. It's not like that today. Today you have to pass four or five written tests, you have to pass drug-screening tests, you have to potential dealing with people, working with people, to see if you can handle people it's pretty tough now. People with Bachelor Degree's work there now.

KM: Really, go to college first huh? (laughing) What role has the union played in your life?

FO: The union has been very good to me. I became the union photographer back in 1986, because I was going to school for photography, they heard about me. After so many years at GM, I decided to go back to school. I was taking courses and taking time off, a leave of absence, going to The Institute of Pittsburgh studying photography. I started becoming a decent photographer, and they started hearing

about me. One day the Union President approached me.

KM: Who would that be?

FO: That was Rudy Gasberrick. He was our President back in the early 80's, and he offered me a job as the Union Photographer, and I accepted. And ever since then I have been in the union big time. I also teach photography, matter of fact, June 3rd I leave for Indianapolis to teach photography. This will be my seven states. Every year I change states and I go teach.

KM: Through the union?

FO: Midwest Labor Press, I belong to the American Midwest Labor Press. It is an organization for union people interested in photography.

KM: This is, your published through the union newsletters?

FO: Yeah I publish the newsletter, it's called, "The See Here". One year I went to this organization and I was taken a course in photography, because I always wanted to learn off every other photographer in the world, and it happened. They didn't have a photographer, he couldn't make it that year. That was about eight years ago. They were very upset, they had gone up, even though I was a photographer they had heard about me, and they offered to let me teach the class. I didn't have materials, no nothing, but I told them I could teach a beginning course if I had to. And ever since I've done that. I've become the Lector on the Board, the Recording Secretary,...

KM: For?

FO: The Midwest Labor Press.

KM: And how many years did you go to school?

FO: Probably all together about two years. Every year The Institute of Pittsburgh puts on a program, a fifty-hour course, and I take it. Go down there and study under Master Photographers and (inaudible)

KM: Great.

FO: And you pick the subject that you want to learn, either families, seniors, posing, composition, getting ready for your Master's Degree, testing, and all that stuff. You can take whatever courses you want.

KM: At The Institute of Pittsburgh?

FO: Triangles, it's called Triangles. It's an organization that they work through Beaver Township, you get you certificates and all that.

KM: Oh ok, so you've been involved with a lot of union activities then?

FO: I have been to more union activities than a lot of our fathers, because I had to be there to cover the story or photographing it.

KM: Can you tell us about some of the activities over the years?

FO: Over the years, all the radicals, matter of fact, you've probably seen my pictures in a couple papers. The Nurses Strike in Warren back in the early eighties, I was involved in that one. That was big. I just covered a story today in Warren, (inaudible) they had a big meeting there today. A rally, I was there covering that.

KM: So all of these other union activities you put into your newsletter?

FO: And in a safe we have bank with all of them if it's union I gotta cover it. If there's something going on for the union, like the Union Spring Picnic for the kids, I gotta cover it. I've been a lot of places.

KM: So the Union sponsors a lot of activities for more than just dances?

FO: Oh, yeah we have a community service. We do everything from go out and paint houses for older people that can't afford it, we have a collections for the lung and cancer people who are members. We have a lot of stuff going on. More than you would think.

KM: So you find the union helpful is necessary?

FO: The union is very helpful, not because I'm in it, because I have sat in and seen the people they have helped.

KM: Have you ever been elected to any positions?

FO: I've been elected twice.

KM: What years were those?

FO: I ran six years ago for Sgt. at Arms, and I won, and then I ran again this time, and I ran unopposed.

KM: As Sgt. at Arms?

FO: As Sgt. at Arms. So this is trusted, I'm an executive board member. I have voice and vote.

KM: The plant has a history of said militant use unionism, especially in the seventies. There was a lot written about this at the time, and people had all these theories as

to why, they would come from fathers who worked in steel mills or it was the seventies, it was the time they grew up in. Can you comment at all on why you think?

FO: The Union was real strong back then. The Union was real strong, because of General Motors was real big at that time. All the factories had a lot of people. Back in early 66, you wouldn't even get your ninety days in before the union came in. If the guy didn't like you, your foreman, just before your 90th day he would fire you, and there was nothing you could do about it.

KM: So the building was there, before the union was organized?

FO: In 66' yeah.

KM: When did the union organize?

FO: Every year later when they weren't as strong as this, they came to be later on in in years, and they learned how to do everything by National Grievances and all that.

KM: Do you think management contributed at all to the way they reacted to them?

FO: Yeah, if you were working there, and you had a problem with management and you didn't have a union you were getting fired. Now they work hand in hand. It's a good concept they got now. I've seen it from the worst to the best.

KM: So in the Strike in 72', can you comment about that or?

FO: The Strike in 72' I was one of the first ones. I didn't have time enough to walk out, I didn't have my ninety days, I had to wait for my foreman to tell me to go home, but guys were just turning around walking right out the door. I had to go sit there and wait for the foreman to say ok nobody's here now you can go. If I had left before the other group I would have lost my job.

KM: Do you think the strikes in 84' and 82' were related at all to the one in 72'?

FO: No, it was just different problems different issues. Money-wise taking away, adding stuff like that.

KM: Seems a lot of people transferred to Lordstown because of downsizing and other plant closing. How do you think those people were received?

FO: The people were received by us, because they were union brothers and we have to respect that, but they come with the attitude they had never seen a plant so well organized, so clean. There is a lot of plants out there, I haven't been to other plants, so they liked the way the work force is, and the way everyone gets along.

KM: Did they adapt to the way our union people were?

FO: Our union people to theirs?

KM: Yeah, your union was way more together say?

FO: They understood that before they came, they knew we had a strong union.

KM: In a position you hold in the union you hold right now, have you been to any conferences or things outside of the area?

FO: Yes, I am involved in CAPP Council in Washington, I go every year to CAPP meet with the legislations and all that.

KM: There was a lot written about The Bega, what do you think went wrong with the Bega?

FO: Bega was they were worried about getting the cars out, not worried about the quality, at the time the cost of the car was a pancake. It was selling so fast they didn't hold production on it, they didn't put it in the yard to get certain items repaired. They just shipped it, and that's what hurt them. They got greedy.

KM: Do you think the workers got blamed for the Bega problem?

FO: We are blamed for everything. We don't care what management does we are going to get the blame for it.

KM: Steel mills had a lot of reputations for gambling taking place. Did you find anything like this or any other vices inside of Lordstown?

FO: There was gambling, but that was just fun gambling; poker at break time and spades, and stuff like that still goes on to this day. We used to play cards a lot.

KM: What do you feel proudest about your work life?

FO: I feel proud that I was able to stick it out. in the hard times at General Motors, and hang in there and make a livelihood out of it, and get an education out of it also.

KM: So do you want to talk about being your education started this business where we are at currently?

FO: I started this business back in 82', 83', or 84' or right around there. I was shooting at all them mirrors, but the business grew out of my home, and I had a duplex and made my studio upstairs. It got to the point where it just got people bothering me everyday, and you knew where I lived downstairs. So I decided to come here, and I rented a small office space here, but I was still doing the photographing at home. in

the other part of the duplex. Then the one-day the lady said she was going to expand here, and wanted to know if I would be interested in moving here, and we worked out a deal and a contract and I've been here ever since. I've been here almost ten years now.

KM: So you're currently still working at GM, do you foresee when you are going to retire?

FO: I would like to retire hopefully next year, early before you know it I will be gone. I already have my time, just one of these days I'm going to say I'm done.

KM: You still in the paint?

FO: I'm still in paint, but I have a very big job as inspector, so I just inspect.

KM: What do you, after it is all done?

FO: Yeah, the paint job comes buy me, and I make sure the paint is done with no flaws.

KM: But what about the other jobs you had on the paint line?

FO: They were terrible, very repetitiousness come under and want to go home and go to bed. You had to do them, because they led to better jobs. Now I have seniority and a better job.

KM: Did you spend a lot of time away from your family, a lot of time working?

FO: By the time you went home, you didn't want to be around nobody, you wanted to sleep. It took time away from your family both ways. You came home and you were just too tired.

KM: A lot of people said they worked six seven days a week.

FO: Your mind was just so focused, you try and forget about the plant so hard, but in a couple more hours you would be right back.

KM: Would you want your son or daughter to work at Lordstown?

FO: I wouldn't mind it today, because of the way they train the kids. The kids are very educated today to get in there, and they all have to have some type of skill, so if you go in there with a skill you'll....

KM: What kind of skill?

FO: Skill trades, electrician, plumber, reamer, any kind of trade you can make it in the work force.

KM: Well would you like to add anything to this interview, anything we haven't covered about your work experience there?

FO: Yes, it's just nice to know I have seen a lot of this, and I have photographs of a lot of the action in the last twenty-eight or twenty-seven years. I have part of that history with me.

KM: You haven't just photographed for leaf letters, I have seen booklets, anniversary booklets of photographs that you have done.

FO: Right now the Warren Region wants me to do their president, if I'm free they want me to photograph him. I think Maureen the new plant manager, just called me to her office. Somebody took pictures, and she is very unhappy, she wants me to redo them.

KM: And that's the new plant manager Maureen, do you know her last name?

FO: Midgley.

KM: Great, I want to thank you for your time and allowing me to interview you. And if there is anything in the future you want to add.

FO: Yeah, just give me a call, I'll give you the last name, Maureen, I know the last name everybody just calls her Maureen she doesn't like to be called Mrs., she is very done to earth.