Garcia, Francisco (Frank) Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Erin Tuttle: Can you please state your full name?

Frank Garcia: My name is Francisco Garcia.

Erin Tuttle: Did you immigrate here yourself?

FG: No, basically, let me think back, my grandparents on my father's side were from Mexico and my great grandparents from my mother's side were from Mexico, so there's at least a couple of generations.

ET: Do you know anything about the immigration?

FG: To be honest, I don't know a lot. I know that on my grandfather's side, on my father's side, he came to the United States as a musician and to buy land. He remained in the United States and worked at odd jobs and started a family.

ET: Did he come straight to Holland?

FG: No, he lived in a small town in Texas. As a matter of fact, I migrated to the state of Michigan in 1966. At that point we were migrants and we were working the migrant seasonal cycle and in 1966 we settled out in the Saginaw Bay City area.

ET: It was you that came to Holland?

FG: Yes, actually it was my mother and five of my other siblings that were still at home who settled down in the state of Michigan.

ET: How old were you?

FG: I'd say I was 19 years old. I come from a large family. There were 10 of us. By that time 3 or 4 of my siblings had already graduated high school. They had joined the service or got jobs so they weren't part of the traveling cycle.

ET: Tell me a little bit about that.

FG: Basically, we were stationed in the Saginaw area and worked the fields around that area. So it would depend on the season. In the fall would be the apples, in the summer it would be pickle picking and potatoes as well, so a lot of our migrant work occurred here in the state of Michigan. Once we settled down, we still continued working in the migrant fields until the very
summer before I went to the University of Michigan. It was a source of income for a one-parent family. My dad was not in the picture at that time. So my mom, along with all of us who could work, helped support the family without trying to get assistance of any kind.

ET: Did you like that?

FG: It was very hard work. I think it helped in the sense that it gave me and all my brothers and sisters a background of what hard work is and it also gave us an idea of what we did not want to do for the rest of our lives which was work from sun up to sun down picking pickles or following the migrant cycle. So, out of the ten of us, I am the only one who went on to college. The other ones are successful in their own fields. Most of them are in sales. Some of them are in manual labor, but they feel quite successful in what they are doing as well.

ET: How were you able to receive an education?

FG: Prior to coming to Michigan, we were in Texas and we had a home there. It wasn't that much of a domestic background for us, so my mom decided to take all of us and move and we left Dad behind. While we were in Texas, we did receive an education, but it was an unsteady education. It was probably not the most nurturing setting for Hispanics at that point. Discrimination was openly practiced. Many of my classmates were either put in special ed classrooms or they were put in migrant classrooms. I think for the majority of these kids, it was not that they did not have the potential, but it was a language barrier. For myself, I was retained in kindergarten due to the language barrier. A lot of my neighbors, friends and classmates went through the same type of placements. Many of them were not able to pull themselves out despite the fact that they had the ability to do better. What assisted me in my schooling at that time was that I had three other brothers and sisters older than me and they were academically successful as well. What would happen is that the older sibling would help the younger one with their studies as my parents were at work long hours to keep all ten of us going. So it was the passing on the torch type of activity, not only in helping the younger brothers and sisters with their school work, but we would also be responsible for taking care of them, cooking, and so forth, while the parents were at work. When we migrated to Michigan, we did settle out in Saginaw and made that our home base, so during the school year I did attend Saginaw High. There I graduated in 1972. Because of the assistance I had received from my brothers and sisters, there were a couple of teachers that took interest in my potential and I was able to make the National Honor Society. And I've always been an avid reader, so that helps.

ET: Did you grow up speaking Spanish?

FG: Yes we did. As a matter of fact, coming to Saginaw, we were mostly bilingual. But our
the United States as well in Texas. A lot of the parents had to go to work to support their families. The rest of us, well, ALL of us, speak English now fluently. We struggle more with Spanish. And my own kids; I have a daughter at the University of Michigan and I have a son who is a ninth grader, speak very little Spanish and are re-learning the language through the school system. As parents, we had to make the decision whether we would give them the same obstacle that we had encountered; to speak Spanish and have them learn English to be successful in school, or to speak English in our home. We chose to concentrate on English and let the kids pick up the foreign language. They can understand Spanish, but are not able to communicate it, even though they are getting better at it. They have heard it from Grandma and Grandpa and my wife's parents living in the area, so they listen to it on a regular basis. The children have to communicate through us, but they do understand it quite well; it's just being able to respond back in Spanish; they're just picking up that skill now.

ET: In elementary school, how did you feel with the discrimination? Did you feel it in high school too?

FG: Well, it was mostly at the elementary level. I was still in Texas, where it wasn't uncommon for students of my background to not be acknowledged or not be given the opportunity to demonstrate our skills. I remember an incident in Texas where we weren't allowed to speak Spanish. I remember me and several of my friends being caught speaking Spanish and we had to wear a sign around our necks. I remember us having to hide around the building just so we could communicate, because it was easier for us to communicate in Spanish than it was in English. I can see what their philosophy was even though it probably wasn't the correct philosophy at that time. We grew up really poor. I remember distinctly being embarrassed by the lunches I took. The schools didn't have hot lunch programs then and even if we had, I don't know if me and my friends would have gone through the process. So a lot of us would be embarrassed of our tacos or whatever we took to school. Later on we found out we could have sold them and made money on them. Later, everybody else wanted to have what we were having. But at that point, we weren't realizing that. It was a very stressful time. As a matter of fact, I remember talking to a Hope College Class a couple of weeks ago and I told them that through the discrimination and through the intimidation, and through not being provided the reinforcement, I did develop a stuttering symptom and I stuttered from elementary through college and beyond college. It was basically the feeling of whether I'm able to compete at this level or at that level, it was a lot of not having that positive reinforcement and safe and nurturing environment that we try to provide now.

ET: How did your brothers and sisters do coming here?

FG: Well, most of them, like I said, have been successful in their own areas. Some of them
work for the government and some of them are sales people. Most of my six sisters have children and have chosen to leave jobs to be at home to care for them. And then there are a couple of brothers who are successful at what they do. One brother likes to work with his hands and not get into a stressful type of employment.

ET: How did you end up in Holland?

FG: We had relatives in Saginaw. My mom packed our bags, or whatever we could carry. We carried a bag and we jumped on the Amtrak and came to Saginaw. I was there until 1972. During that time we did attend school and worked the migrant fields during the summer and fall. In 1972, I graduated from Saginaw High and then I went on to the University of Michigan. On a Sunday night, I walked off the pickle field and on Monday morning I arrived at the University of Michigan by bus with dirt still under my fingernails. It provided us with a good work ethic - an ethic that has helped all of us succeed.

ET: What was your life in Saginaw like?

FG: When we started out, we lived with relatives for a short time. Then my mom rented an apartment for us. It was a one-bedroom apartment for seven of us. It wasn't the best of neighborhoods. As a matter of fact, the people that we rented from sort of had had some conflict with neighbors and so forth. The man of the household had been shot to death by a rival gang or neighbor. And then his son retaliated and shot whoever had shot his dad and that young man got killed as well. Eventually, that whole family was wiped out - the males at least. So, Saginaw was not a good environment for us to be growing up in. Eventually, my mom moved us out of that apartment and we did rent a house which was fairly big. I had a couple of brothers and sisters who had returned to Saginaw and were helping the family. Many of us, as we entered high school, worked after school in the neighborhood, so we made it.

ET: Where did you fall in the family order?

FG: I am the fifth oldest. There were ten of us.

ET: Did you like it when you came to Saginaw?

FG: It was an unusual environment for us. We came from a small town of about 1700 people to a big city like Saginaw, close to 100,000. It would have been very easy for us to go on the wrong side of society or the law. My mom ruled the house with a very firm hand; very firm rules, and she was able to keep all of us from getting into trouble. But it was not unusual for our friends to miss school on Mondays because they were in jail or had been wounded or shot. It was
a question of having a strong parent who believed in rules and believed in hard work, and who believed in respect and obedience. It helped all of us.

ET: Because of your friends living the stereotype, did you ever feel like people looked at you in the same way?

FG: I was actually one of the smarter ones. I knew that in order to be able to survive in the type of high school I was going to, that you either had to learn how to defend yourself or you would be picked on. The question was how far could we cross the line without getting into trouble. What I learned was that I picked my friends carefully - friends who were not trouble makers, but friends who could also very easily defend themselves if we had to. So we were not the type to look for trouble, but we were the type who could respond to it if it came to us. Now, here at this school, I see kids who don't make their choices so carefully in who their friends are and sometimes they end up falling into the wrong group. That's not so much into a gang type of environment, but more into an academic demonstration environment. If a student's friends are not passing the classes, he's not going to pass the classes. They get caught up in those groups. It's better to pull back and say, "They can still be my friends, but I will be successful." That's basically one of the skills that my family had, that we were able to communicate and socialize with everyone but we were able to follow the house rules and do well, academically.

ET: What about college? What was that like for you?

FG: College was a stranger experience than moving to Saginaw. I was the first one and the only one to go on to college. At that point, somewhere along my career, I picked up a love for reading. I had also picked up the idea that I would someday want to go on to college and maybe attend law school. But I also knew financially that my family could not afford that. As I got older and I started getting the appropriate grades and I started getting some support from teachers, the reality became clear but I knew there would still be obstacles, mainly finances. Fortunately, it was the time of affirmative action, where opportunities for people of my background, who financially could not afford it but demonstrated the potential, and so there were programs that enabled me to attend college. I remember being at Saginaw high as a senior and not being approached by a counselor despite the fact that I was on the honor society and despite the fact that my grades were beyond a 3.00 average. I didn't have a counselor come and ask if I was interested in college. So, I knew I needed to make a move. I contacted universities on my own. I applied at the University of Michigan, at Michigan State and at Central. I filled out the applications for financial support and saw that I would have the support.

ET: What about your family?
FG: They were not able to assist with it much because it was a new experience. Because I was the first, it was the first time to deal with forms, which were like a foreign language to them. A lot of applications were sent back asking for more information. But eventually I did get accepted to all three universities. Then, the question was, "Okay, I've been accepted, but how do I pay for it?" Fortunately, at that time, they were also providing financial assistance through grants, scholarships, loans and so forth. All three colleges offered me some assistance and then I had to look at who was going to offer me more assistance. I knew that my family could not help support me at college. I remember being at college and coming home on the weekend and my mom saying, "I love you son, but I cannot afford to give you bus money to send you back, so we will have to limit your trips back to the major holidays and the summers." It was that tight. I ended up at the University of Michigan, a strange experience for me. It was a big place. I was one of about 15 migrant, Hispanic students that had been recruited out of the migrant cycle and we were given the opportunity to go there. The majority of the 15 were from Texas. Out of the 15, only about five of us graduated from the University of Michigan. The other 10 did graduate but they moved back to their home state of Texas. Texas ingrains a strong bond into a person and they often want to go back. The first couple of years at college, I lived in the dorm with some of my Hispanic friends and it was tough. It was tough because, in spite of having good grades, we were not prepared for the academic demands the university was expecting from us. The University of Michigan asks for the "blue book" type of responses for final exams and papers, so we got to the point where we were able to write what the instructors wanted. My GPA was not anything to jump for joy over when I graduated, but just the fact that I was able to graduate and move on was a great accomplishment. Like I mentioned, my daughter is there now, as well, and so the whole intent is that my family took me to a new level, and I want my children to exceed what I did. I had gotten married my senior year. My wife was attending Eastern Michigan. She's from the same background that I am. Her parents came to Michigan as migrants as well. They had done more migrant work than I did. They actually had gone through several states. She happened to be there in Michigan on the same type of financial assistance as I was. And so we got married our senior year. It was a financially hard year after that. We worked a year in Detroit. My wife taught there for a year as a substance abuse counselor for young teen-agers. After a year, my wife wanted to come back to the Holland area. Her parents reside in Michigan about 25 miles from here. So at that point, this was around 1977, she applied here in the Holland area and got a teaching job as a reading teacher and I got a job selling cars, because I had not been able to overcome my stuttering problem. I forced myself to face the public and speak to the public. After a year of doing that, I was able to gain the confidence I needed to deal with most of my stuttering. When I stutter now, it's because I'm mentally exhausted from work or just tired or whatever. Also, after working there a year, I knew I wasn't a very good salesman. I was too honest of a person. I went back to school and got my teaching credentials from the University of Michigan. In 1979 I received a teaching job. We were still living in the Pullman area with my in-laws, but when I got my job, we moved to Holland and rented a place at 16th and Central.
got a job as a migrant bilingual teacher. Unfortunately, what was happening with people of my Hispanic background, was that the only jobs we were able to get were either as a migrant bilingual teacher or as some kind of pull-out teacher. So there was another obstacle that I needed to overcome. My wife and I needed to prove ourselves; that we could be regular classroom teachers and be good at it as well. I taught there in that program for five years and then I got hired at another school in 1983. There, again, I started out as a migrant bilingual teacher, so again I was reinforced with the idea that it was the only job available to me. So, again, one of my goals was to prove that I could get a regular job like everybody else. Whether all of this is real or imaginary, I don't know, but that's what I felt that I needed to overcome. So, after a couple of years, I did get a second grade assignment, and eventually I taught second, fourth and fifth. I taught at West Ottawa for twelve years, I believe. It got to the point that half of my classrooms were made up of kids whose parents had requested my classroom, which proved to me that I was doing a successful job. The other half of my kids were there because the administrators thought they needed some structure or discipline, so I was able to provide structure and a quality of learning environment for the students. When we came to Holland, there were not a lot of what I would call Hispanic friends. In fact, I don't recall a lot of African-American families. I only recall one or two families from the area with an African background. So, it was still a very dominant Dutch environment. I remember that once we had kids, we started to notice changes in our neighborhood. There were kids who were starting to wander in the middle of night, and not with good intentions. That's not the environment we wanted for our kids. Our daughter was about five and our son had just been born, so we bought another house in the Holland Heights area. Eventually, our daughter ended up going to Holland Heights Elementary School. My daughter was one of two Hispanic students at Holland Heights, so she was there from first through third grade. The other Hispanic student happened to be my nephew, my wife's brother's son. So they were both from the same type of background. We expected quality work and we expected them to do well in school, so I think that the staff there was fine with it. If you go to Holland Heights now, you'll notice that about 50% of the population there is of minority background. One of the areas where I see some of the older teachers struggling with is not having changed with the community as to what students come prepared to do at school. There was a principal who once said that a school should be prepared for the student, not the student prepared for the school. In other words, we can't expect all of them coming in already knowing their ABC's. We should expect that some of them coming in will not know their numbers and colors, and some of them will know them. That's basically the philosophy we have taken on here. We have about a 35% minority population which has been a change from what it was ten years ago. We have dialogued among ourselves as to what our students come prepared to do, and from there is where we need to take them and help their growth.

ET: What did you see when you were teaching migrant classes? Did you see them experiencing the same things you did?
FG: Yes, I did. I saw a lot of teachers thinking, this student is an ESL student; this student is a migrant student, he's the responsibility of Mr. Garcia. Where the philosophy should have been, "This is my student, how can Mr. Garcia help me help this student be successful?" Instead of saying, "He doesn't know English, you take him" or "He's a migrant student; he's only going to be here for four weeks, you worry about him." It would have been more beneficial to the student if the teacher would have embraced him as his own student. The teacher should have been the student's advocate, with my help. As a migrant ESL teacher, because of my background, I maybe had higher expectations for my migrant, bilingual students and the intent was that I didn't want them to use their language barrier as a crutch, but I also wanted them to challenge themselves to learn the language and do their best work and not fall back on "I don't understand the language," or "I'll be gone in three weeks." Because when society takes on that attitude, so can that part of the population. I remember a lot of my kids went on to graduate from West Ottawa. Just this summer, I happened to be here in the building, and there was a semi pulled in delivering materials to the school and the driver asked, "Are you Mr. Garcia?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I was one of your students" He gave me his name and I remembered him. He was one of the kids that had demonstrated potential and I had invested a lot of time in. He said, "I own my own company, here." It made me feel good because he remembered who I was and that I had laid a foundation for him, and this is what we're trying to do for our students right now. When I was teaching in West Ottawa, I obtained my masters in administration at Michigan State. Again, it was that feeling of I needed to continue to educate myself, to continue to progress toward another level of experience and so it was a self challenge. But it was also a challenge to demonstrate to society and to demonstrate to other kids that you can come from this type of background and, with hard work and with an education, you can be successful. I started out my graduate work at Western and I wasn't too happy with it. I didn't feel they were challenging me for what I was looking to do, so I transferred to Michigan State and there they gave me a real good challenge. It took me six years, actually, to get my masters. I was teaching and I had two kids, so there was lot of night classes - a lot of summer classes. There was also a family crisis that prevented me from going into administration at that point. After a couple of years dealing with that issue, I started applying for administrative positions and principalships on the elementary level. I was not successful. I did not get a job the first four times that I tried. So the question was, "Do I continue or do I give up?" I went on vacation and decided to think about what I would do. Should I continue teaching, which I enjoy, or should I continue to look for an administration job? Then I received a call from the superintendent of Holland. He asked me if I was interested in applying for the assistant principalship at East Middle School. I didn't have a lot of background in the middle school, but I did interview for and receive the position. After a year there, which I think was a successful year, I got promoted to this position. And that's about it. This is my third year as principal of this school. It's a good setting for me. We have a 35% minority population here. I had never really been convinced that being a role model is really
important in a student's success and now that I am in this position, I do see the value behind it. I do see the kids who find it pleasing and are surprised that I can speak to them in their language. What also has happened is there has been an increase in mono-lingual, Spanish-speaking parents coming to school because they know that the principal speaks Spanish. I receive at least, on the average, two to three calls a day from Spanish-speaking parents with concerns or some information that in the past might not have happened. I go back to my own background with ten brothers and sisters. My mom and my dad never went to parent-teacher conferences. They never went to the school because it was like a foreign country. There was the question of being embarrassed; the question of not being able to relate at that level. So my being here has opened the door for a lot of mono-lingual parents. Because of how I was brought up, because I went to the University of Michigan, because I've lived in Holland now over 20 years, and because of my command of English and Spanish, I relate to all the cultures and all the parents we have here.

ET: What about your own children? Do they feel discrimination? How have they done?

FG: My daughter has felt more discrimination at the University of Michigan. She went to West Ottawa after 4th grade all the way through high school. She always did well in school. She was in orchestra since 5th grade and she played sports at the middle school level. She eventually joined the Latin club in 9th grade and went on to be national secretary for the Junior Latin Club. She went out to the national convention and gave a campaign speech and she was vice president for the State of Michigan. Even now, at the University of Michigan, she is still involved in that organization. Right now, she is on the varsity crew team at the University of Michigan. So, because of what mom and dad have done (mom is a teacher as well) and because of the expectations we have had and the work ethic that we have incorporated in them, she has gone on to levels of achievement that we would never have reached. She has suffered a little bit of discrimination at the University of Michigan, as she is majoring in Spanish. But, because she did have a Spanish background, most of the instructors that she has had are from Spain, so they have seen her as a disgrace that she did not already speak Spanish, so she's had to fight that little battle. That's the only time that she felt she has been discriminated against. My son, on the other side, is a ninth grader now. He suffered a traumatic head injury when he was six years old, so he's having to deal with some handicaps; physical handicaps and other handicaps as well. We received his report card the other day and his grades are either A's or B's. I think there was a C in there, but what he's demonstrated to me and even to my daughter, is that he has achieved those type of grades because he works three times as hard as all his other classmates. So, again, it demonstrates that in spite of the fact that he has a head injury and some physical handicaps, he will be successful because he does know how to invest his time as well. So I think that we're going toward a pattern here and that hard work is what has helped us be successful, or at least achieved the level that we're at now.
ET: Do you have anything else you would like to add?

FG: Living here in Holland, being from a minority background, and despite the fact that I have a masters in education and despite the fact that I have a position here at an administrative level, when I'm in my blue jeans and I haven't shaved over the weekend, when I walk into, say, a car lot or walk into a store in town, I sort of always wonder if I am being watched to see if I'm going to put something into my pocket and walk out of there. I don't know if it's a feeling that you're able to get rid of when you've been brought up in the type of environment that I grew up in Texas and having to work this hard to achieve what I have. I don't think that a lot of people are able to understand unless they've had to walk in those shoes. And I think that anyone who was not raised in Holland, someone who was maybe raised in an environment as migrants, would express the same type of feeling. It would basically be like you walking into Margueritas, the Hispanic restaurant here, and all you see are Hispanic people and they're all talking Spanish and they are looking at you as you walk in. It's that kind of feeling that always seems to follow you. And it's also the kind of feeling for me. I have chosen to take that feeling and have challenged myself to continue to better myself. At this point, I'm wondering if I should continue my education to go towards a PhD, and what would be the purpose of it. I guess that's what I'm debating. It's something that's been ingrained in me that I should continue to learn. I'm not taking courses right now, but I'm a continuous reader and my reading, now, deals with education and with how to implement new strategies and how to address the needs of our students. It's a continuing learning process for all of us.