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Hernandez, Luciano Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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Interview with Luciano Hernandez
Interviewed by Joseph O'Grady, 1990

JO: When did you first arrive in Holland?

LH: February of 1971.

JO: Where was your first place of residence within the city?

LH: 155 Central Avenue, right over there by...do you know where the Warm Friend Hotel used to be?

JO: Over there by the bank.

LH: Yes, a block over.

JO: Was there a neighborhood there or were you surrounded by factories or parking lots?

LH: All of them. On one side of the house there was, like three houses down and on the other side of the house was a canvas boat place. Behind the house was another house, then there was a parking lot, across the street there was a parking lot and one house another parking lot and a barn.

JO: Were your neighbors Hispanic?

LH: Yes, they were. Our immediate neighbor was.

JO: What about predominantly, were they Hispanic or Anglo?

LH: Probably in the block, probably predominately Hispanic.

JO: Where did you originally come from?

LH: The Rio Grand Valley, that's in Texas. Elsa, Texas.

JO: What's the nearest big town near Elsa?

LH: Probably McElen, real big town. McElen and Brownsville, probably.

JO: Was Elsa a rural or urban area, small town?

LH: It was a small town.

JO: How many people came with you from Elsa, Texas?

LH: Our family, of course I came with my dad. There was...six of us.

JO: What were the conditions that brought your family to Holland?

LH: To work, basically.

JO: Was your family a migrant family?

LH: We were migrants.

JO: Was there economic slowdown within Elsa that pushed your family to...?

LH: I don't think so, because I guess my family's been involved with being migrants for so long. My grandfather was involved and probably all his life. It's not really economic slowdown. It's really more just, you get a chance to, you get a job at a factory or something and settle down and have kids. It's more of an opportunity.

JO: You had six of you come with you to Michigan, your two parents and how many brothers and sisters?

LH: One brother, two sisters.

JO: Where was your first job within the city?

LH: Well, my first job was at a pickle farm, picking pickles. It was in Holland, east of Holland.

JO: How many years did you do that?

LH: A couple years. Then I went on to _____, then to dishwashing, then to stock person at a grocery store.

JO: What was your first major career job? Like a job that you supported yourself on?

LH: That would have been where I'm working now, Castex Industries, in 1984, as an illustrator.

JO: How long have you held the position as illustrator at Castex?

LH: Well, it's been on and off. I started in 1984 and then I went back to school for engineering design degree. And I was working there part-time since 1984. Then I went to work somewhere else for about a year or two, then went back to Castex full-time for about year.

JO: Did you attend any schooling within Holland?

LH: Yes.

JO: What were your impressions of the school system?

LH: I have a little bit different, I didn't have the normal schooling. When we came to Holland, I went to Lincoln Elementary. From looking back, what I can see was very much diverse and multiculture. I guess back then it wasn't really multiculture but maybe biculture, the Hispanics, or Mexican-Americans, and Anglo people. Lincoln School was a very good school I thought at the time. But then in the 6th grade, I went to the Christian Schools, to Holland Christian Junior High, 6th - _____ school, Holland Christian after that.

JO: What were your experiences at Holland Christian?

LH: Basically, it was a good one. There was a lot of barriers that we had overcome. My brother was the first one to go through and he kind of lightened up the load on me. I don't know what this is saying, but he would always get into fights and he would get caught _____ and things like that. So he kind of broke the barriers. When I came

around, a lot of people were afraid of me. [laughter] So nobody would really pick on me. Again, I had a different experience there because my brother got to be a pretty tough cookie. Probably better off talking to my brother because he was the first one that went through there. He had guys just basically just doing stupid things, like not letting him out the door, ganging up on him. He had to fight, sort of like being in a ghetto or a gang. You have no choice but to fight, unless you want to get your butt kicked. So he really went through all that. I guess that what I noticed, though, the most was that at first people were a little apprehensive about me and my brother, and I guess the rest of the family. But once we broke down all those barriers, once we got through all that, the apprehension by them, and I suppose some part by me, it got to be a really neat situation. Just one of the guys.

JO: How much English did you know when you first arrived in Holland?

LH: Not much.

JO: Did your parents know a good deal of English when they arrived?

LH: No, not much. Hardly any at all.

JO: You picked up most of your English through daily contact and interaction?

LH: School.

JO: Did you receive any bilingual education while you were within the Holland School system or at Holland Christian High?

LH: My senior year I took a Spanish class.

JO: Did you have any English classes, outside classes to help you with English?

LH: No.

JO: What were your first impressions of the city that you can remember?

LH: It was different. It was cold, we came here in the winter time. We weren't used to that. It was really strange, see all these new places. I really don't remember much. It was different for me, you noticed that the teachers treated you really different. I guess because it's a different community. I guess when I went to school in the Valley, I guess people are used to Mexican Americans or Chicanos, whatever you call them. Here the teachers can't say your name...I guess those are the kind of things you notice. Not that they weren't nice or anything, that was just things you noticed, when they can't say your name. Even the kids here, can't say your name. You got to get through that.

JO: Did you have a positive image of the city when you first came?

LH: Very much so. I'd never been involved in a parade before, never had Tulip Time. Kids would tell me about how they were involved in the parade each year. I really looked forward to it, and I did for a long time.

JO: Did you ever have a negative image of Holland? Did you ever hate Holland? Ever think of moving out of the city?

LH: Yes, sure. As a youngster, I can't say that I had a real negative experience because I had a tendency to shrug a lot of those things off, or I wouldn't pay attention to it. I was basically naive sometimes when I was growing up. I tended to look on the bright side all the time. That's why when _____. It isn't until I kind of grew up a little more, early '20s, late teenage, I started noticing something different. There are a lot of good things in Holland. I think the positives outweigh the negatives. I

don't know how to say this, but there's certain places that you can't prove anything. I'm not a lawyer, never will be, but I do have feelings. Certain places in Holland where the Hispanics are... I don't know if unwelcome is the word, they're not really seen in certain restaurants. I often think, if I was just another person how I could go anywhere I want. Seeing as I am Hispanic there's certain places... I can go there, but you don't feel comfortable. Certain restaurants, certain situations, a lot of things that people take for granted. Those are the kind of things that I'm really starting to notice now. As a kid, I'd go anywhere. But when you grow up you kind of pay attention to more your surroundings, how you're treated, things like that.

JO: Besides from being prevented from going to certain areas in Holland, what are some other major problems you encountered within the community?

LH: I really haven't had many problems, other than that. And again when I graduated from school, there's certain places that I applied to that... I felt discriminated. But again, I can't prove anything. Nobody really can, I suppose if I brought a lawsuit or a case to somebody maybe it would be proven, but those kinds of little... there's a lot of subtleties in Holland. I'm not sure if that's a real problem. If someone's going to be prejudiced against you, you'd rather not work for them anyway, you can go on somewhere else.

JO: Did you ever feel there was any racial tension within Holland during the time you stayed here? Was there ever a point where the Hispanics organized a civil rights movement of any sort to confront the Anglo community?

LH: I think there has never been any type of coordinated or massive effort to bring

anybody, those kind of lawsuits, but I think that at this point in time as we speak right now is probably about as crucial as we can get as far as relations with everybody in town. We're at a crucial point, here we are and the city's been growing and it's going to continue to grow. How are we as leaders going to help the city ? I say that tension is kind of starting to pick up a little bit. As Hispanics get more educated and they've lived here longer, you sort of demand a certain respect. Like I, myself, pretty much grew up in Holland. And when you still have people treating you as foreigners, you got to realize there's something wrong here, some psychology, some mentality. The biggest barrier I see is the unwilling of people to budge on their thinking. You don't have to be a liberal or a conservative, you just got to have an open mind. I think that's going to be our biggest barrier. I think if we can break down the close-mindedness, on the part of everybody, not just white people. Hispanics have a certain attitudes towards Anglo people because a lot of people come from migrant backgrounds, and a lot of their bosses are Anglo. They come here and same thing. So they have a certain apprehension about that. There's a feeling of mistrust. That's something you have to really work on.

JO: Do you think this mistrust is the major barrier between the Hispanic community and the rest of the Holland community?

LH: Mistrust is part of it, I think more open-mindedness, willing to look at what are the realities. The other day there was a paper, did you read about the paper that _____ put up _____ ? I didn't read it all yet, I haven't had time, I've only read like 2 or 3 pages. A lot of these things seem to be new to these

educators. It's like a shocker, it does seem like a shocker. And I would be too if I heard it for the first time. But Hispanics have been living with that for years. They've know things like that for years, they've been battling those kinds of things. That's why tension is building up. You get more educated, you lose patience. I guess maybe on the part of everybody, but I think more on the part of Hispanics because like I said, a lot of them live here all their lives and they still get treated like foreigners.

JO: What does the Hispanic community offer to Holland?

LH: A lot. First of all, hard labor. Hispanics, most everybody from here comes from a hard working background, migrant background where they're used to working 12, 15 hours a day, for little money. So when Hispanics get a fairly paid job and maybe some long hours, they're happy, real happy. My dad for you, he worked at Heinz, he still works there, going on 20 years. He's been working 12 hours a day for so long. The summers and the other thing I think we have to take advantage of is the diversity in this world economy. We've had to think different since we were born. The general society is pretty much... they think one way. When you get involved with other people it forces people to work Maybe sometimes for better solutions. Say we want to solve the education problem, we haven't, what I would do if I was God or if I was the superintendent, I'd make sure there were some Hispanics on the board. I know they've tried it, but there's got a be another way you try it. Once you get everyone together to solve a solution I think that's where Hispanics really help. Know what I'm saying?

JO: I think I know what you're saying. You're saying to a certain extent that by getting the Hispanic community involved that Holland can address its problems more effectively and solve the problem once and for all.

LH: Like I say, people might ask me, ask anybody, "What do you perceive as the problem?" But you tell them and they won't listen. That's why things like _____ paper _____ because otherwise people don't listen.

JO: What organizations do you belong to within the Hispanic community and the Holland community?

LH: I'm on the City Council, I've been involved with the Arts Council, to some extent. I've been involved with the Latin Americans United for Progress lately. Board of registration _____. Other than that, I'm on some boards for the city too.

JO: What would you really like to see changed within the city of Holland?

LH: Funny you should ask. I've been working on a paper, I'm going to make some recommendations to City Council. I'd like to see education, more Hispanic graduating. As far as the city is concerned, more people in visible jobs, Hispanics in visible jobs, more Hispanics involved in office personnel, to work in offices. I don't know if you saw this or not, but about a month ago there was a report by the Civil Rights Commission, and Ottawa county was the worst in the state as far as employment of minorities in white collar jobs or anywhere I guess. Every job I have held in any office I have been the only one. And I can tell you, not everybody in those offices have an education. It's interesting _____. That's another thing, I'd like to see more people involved in business and involved in Holland school.

JO: What would most Hispanics in your opinion want changed within Holland? Do they agree with you or do they have a different version of what should be changed?

LH: I don't know. I think that most Hispanics want what everybody else wants. Just as your neighbors across the street want. They want to live a good life, they don't want to be harassed, they don't want their kids to be harassed. They want their kids to be treated equally. They just want to be treated equally. And that's the way I feel. Most of my life has been spent trying to be equal with everybody. Everybody strives to be, I went to school to be artist design, to me, that was what I wanted to be. I didn't want to be a Hispanic councilman, I wanted to be a councilman. I guess that's the other thing I wanted to tell you, every since I've been on here, people like to label. Because I'm Hispanic, I have all the answers. And that's a big shocker to me, because I am not an anthropologist, I am not a social worker. I have feelings yes, and that's all I go on. I'm not very analytical at all about the Hispanic problem. Although I'm labeled as an expert in the field, on Hispanic issues, and that's one thing I dislike. I kinda resent, not that I'm not proud because I'm Hispanic, I am proud that I'm Mexican American, very proud, that's the way people get where they are, they're proud of their culture. But every time a Hispanic issue comes up, everybody looks at me. What's going on here, you know? [laughter] I went to school to be a designer, I came and made City Council to represent everybody. I'll do my best. It's just not Anglo people, though, it's the Hispanic people as well. They see you as one of their own, they're comfortable. Which is fine. I come to realize my position and what I should to, but I guess you're not really in control of your life, everybody else is.

JO: Just to follow up on that, you're the representative of the second ward, am I correct?

Is that ward a Hispanic ward or is it a multicultural ward?

LH: Very multicultural.

JO: What is the span, the blocks that the second ward covers?

LH: Lincoln Avenue all the way to the lake over here, 14th street, north to 14th all the way to Lake _____.

JO: So you get the downtown area as well?

LH: Yes.

JO: What do you see for the future of Holland and its Hispanic community?

LH: Kind of a mix, merger _____. Believe me, I've always looked at the populous things, and I've always done that, but again we go back to relations. You have to work _____. If we do that, I think the picture for Hispanics and everyone else in Holland is rosy. When you get people talking and you get people looking at reality and looking inside and saying, "Am I really prejudice? Am I really doing the right thing?" That's in a part of everyone, every person alive in this town, no matter what religion or race you are. If we do that I think we have a good town, Holland's going to continue to be the _____ have a good city. But if we don't do that, it could be ugly.

JO: What do you mean really by ugly?

LH: Any number of things could happen. It could turn out to be..I don't know, a civil war or something, I don't know. [laughter] That's to the extreme. What can happen to is that Hispanics stay at one level and everyone else just grows and what happens

you _____ people that are suffering, but will suffer more. Any time that happens, just look at history, French Revolution. I'm not saying this is as big as that, I'm not saying it'll turn into that, but that's basically it on a smaller scale, not a violent scale, but that's basically what happens. People start getting impatient, and the Hispanics a lot of times don't have the tendency to go and provoke things, what they do instead is they turn internally and that's when we get people in crime, drugs, drop-outs. The bad things in life. I would suggest that, for you doing this paper, go further than where Hispanics come from, _____ Texas. Go back, go back to a thousand years, go back at least two hundred years, when Hispanics, they were Spanish at the time, they were caught in the _____ which married with the Indians. Look at how they lived and you'll see that kind of spiritual part of it, that mentality still exists in Hispanics today.

JO: So you are saying that the Mestizo _____ culture - half Spanish, half Indian - still exists, that mentality within the Hispanic people?

LH: Yes.

JO: Can you describe what you mean by that mentality?

LH: Well, we can talk about, like the Indians, the Aztec Indians, used to feel that whatever happens to you, happens to you. Somebody else told me this, an Indian used to feel like a piece of driftwood going down the river. Whatever course it takes you, that's going to be your destiny. That's just one idea. The other one is more of a spiritual thing. Hispanics are very spiritual, whether they know it or not. I know I'm beginning to see that. If you would talk to more experts on this they would be able to

tell you more. What I'm noticing today, let me give you an example. I ran into an Indian, more Indian than anything, the darker you see a Hispanic the more Indian he's got, the ones from Mexico anyway. They think a lot more spiritual. There's this guy that I met, he was from Mexico and he belonged to this group called _____. What it is, it's a group that goes all over the world, helps out people in need. He told me that they were going to Libya, _____ brothers and sisters in Libya. Libya? He saw me do that and he goes, "Yes, Libya. People need help over there too, right?" I said, "Yes." He proceeded to tell me that boundaries were invented by the white man. We believe that there are no boundaries. That's what happened like in the Southwest. The Indians believed there were no boundaries, that's why it was so easy for the Europeans to come and claim it, stake their ground. I think a lot of people just stood there, "What are you doing? This isn't your land, this God's land"...or another being. That kind of mentality is really still, I believe it still is. Business, that's why a lot of Hispanics aren't into business, it doesn't come natural to a lot of us. We don't stake out the way everybody else does. That's one of the reasons we see Hispanics in the position that we're in now.

JO: Do you see that image or that mindset you say within Hispanics do you see that changing as they stay within Holland or the United States? Do you think... the Mestizo mindset changing as Hispanics stay within Holland? Do you see Hispanics becoming more aggressive instead of more passive?

LH: I don't know. It's hard for me to deal with business kind of things. I've gotten to know and I'm kinda required, and kinda work against you, the grain a little bit.

These are just my opinion, you might want to talk to other people. Have you talked to Al Gonzales?

JO: Yes, he was the first one I interviewed.

LH: He's very much up on it, he knows his history well, and this kinda thing. I said earlier that in order for everyone to progress you have to have an open mind and be willing to change it a little bit.

JO: Thank you very much, Mr. Hernandez.