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Muniz, Rick Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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Interview with Rick Muniz
Interviewed by Joseph O'Grady, 1990

JO: When did you first arrive in Holland?

RM: I arrived in Holland June 2, 1986.

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

RM: That would be, actually when I moved into Holland the first time I lived with a friend who I had gone to college with, and it was in the 10th Street area near Waterfront Park there.

JO: What was the condition of the neighborhood at that time? Was there a neighborhood?

RM: The condition of the neighborhood was similar to what it is right now.

JO: Were your neighbors Hispanic?

RM: Primarily in that area of town there was primarily Hispanics living in that area. I only lived there for a few short weeks before I found permanent residency of my own. Or temporary residency in another apartment. And so since I have been here I lived in short times on the north side for a little while, also near Lake Macatawa and Lake Michigan in one of the cottages in the Point West area. And then also here in Holland city limits.

JO: Have your neighbors been basically Hispanics or have they been mixed?

RM: They have been mixed depending on the area of where I lived. This inner-city area, the 10th Street area that portion is probably the largest Hispanic population of any area that I lived in. On the north side it was mostly farm land around, and I would guess more or less summer homes. Also in the Point West area many summer homes, and not many Hispanics at all.

JO: Where do you originally come from?

RM: I originally come from the Detroit area on the other side of the state.

JO: Actually within Detroit or in a suburb?

RM: In the suburb of the Detroit, an area which they call Down River which includes a number of smaller suburbs of Detroit.

JO: Northern part of Detroit?

RM: It's in the southeast part.

JO: How many people came with you? Did you come by yourself?

RM: When I came I came by myself. My family lives in Detroit. My parents, my sisters and brothers all live on that side of the state. So I am the first one over here.

JO: Why did you actually come to Holland?

RM: Well I went to school, graduated from college, from Western Michigan University in '86, and at that time had some friends who were from Holland. So I visited Holland on occasion and discovered it to be a nice place to live. I had a job offer here at the end of my school term in '86 and I moved here the summer after my graduation.

JO: So your first job in the city was here right at Upward Bound?

RM: No, no. My first job in the city was with the Holland Sentinel. It had been for a reporter and primarily I would say that they had interest in me to be able to contact the Hispanic community more so than had been done in previous reporting. I had already established contacts here by being involved through the college. The paper determined that it could benefit from the contacts that I had, and the contacts that I could continue to make in the Hispanic community. And so when I was there, I

created a Hispanic beat I would say and covered the regular beats that were also there such as county news.

JO: How long did you work at the Sentinel for?

RM: I worked at the Sentinel until November of 1988.

JO: Why did you switch from your job as a reporter to this job?

RM: The job as a reporter I enjoyed but then there also came an opening here at the Upward Bound program, which gave me the opportunity to work with students and work in the area of education which had always been an interest of mine and had always been something I looked forward to after graduation. So I had a variety of interests, I pursued the interest of journalism when I got out of college. When another job opened up for counseling I took that opportunity.

JO: You didn't attend any schooling here in Holland?

RM: No.

JO: And you don't have any relatives that have attended any schooling here either?

RM: No.

JO: But you have gained an impression about the school system through your counseling position here at the program. Can you just give me some of your reflections on the school system of Holland?

RM: One of the reasons I moved here was one of the areas that I was familiar with was the schools. I had met people in the schools. My interest in education came from the fact that I had come to the schools to speak with high school students in the past that I had put on presentations for them. I had helped organize workshops here in the

community to help parents get in contact with the schools. So some of the first contacts I made were the administrators from the school districts, to kind of open some avenues for parents. So in the schools I did see a willingness to increase their effectiveness in the Hispanic community, and I saw Hispanics who were wishing to organize. And so having some experience doing that in college, I and a large group of others facilitated a process where we did increase the activity of the Hispanics within the school district. And what I saw in the district was the attempt by administrators to reach out to Hispanics, but not to the satisfaction of the Hispanics that were living here in Holland. That is due to the fact that there is no place that I have ever seen or that I have ever been in Michigan that has such a concentration of Hispanics, such a presence in the city and in the schools. Although it is a minority of the population, 11%, still that is a staggering amount comparatively to others in the state. It's a population that is respected in the school population, but it is not respected in the teacher population. And that does raise some concern with parents. I can see that there is a need to increase the number of students that are graduating from these schools to go into the area of teaching and come back and teach in their own neighborhoods and their own areas. But that sense has to be ingrained by the educational system all the way to the elementary level. Students have to know that they can be teachers and come back and make changes. Because I do see, whether it's real or whether it's not, there have been impressions by students that did not feel comfortable in the school district. So whether or not those feelings are founded in some true thing or not, the fact remains that the feeling exists, and that something has

to be done to change those.

JO: So you feel that the number one problem with the school system is the lack of Hispanic teachers within the system itself?

RM: Exactly. And if you talk to the administrative officials they will say there in kind of a catch 22 where they cannot find qualified Hispanics to work in the area. But there should be, with the number of Hispanic students that they are graduating, if they are graduating the number of Hispanic students that they say they are then there should be some who should come back to the system as teachers and be able to work for them someday. So to be qualified they need to be qualified by the same system that needs Hispanic teachers. And so maybe an extra effort needs to be put forth to graduate some qualified students.

JO: Overall in the school system, do you think it's a good school system?

RM: I think it's an excellent school system. When I was with the newspaper, I covered the Zeeland school system, I did some coverage of the Holland School district, and the West Ottawa School district. And three schools that the programs that they had, the innovativeness of the teachers, I find to be just excellent. They do a good job.

JO: How did the Holland School system fair in the area of bilingual education for children of migrants that had just settled within Holland and do not have a strong background in English?

RM: Well, like any bilingual program you will find or any kind of social program that you will find they will always feel like they are overworked and understaffed because of the job that they have to do. And it is a demand that is increasing all of the time.

The number of bilingual students that are coming into the school district, bilingual also, but a great number of monolingual students who will struggle to be bilingual. That needs to continue to be a priority of the school district. I see the bilingual program here doing the best that they can with the resources that they have. The thing is that they have the support from the community, the Hispanic community and the general community that helps them operate to the extent that they need to.

JO: But they do need improvement...

RM: Yes, they do need improvement. They need it just like there are extra teachers needed. There are extra bilingual teachers aides needed. And they do an excellent job in recruiting themselves for those positions, to get bilingual teacher aides, to get other staff, but of course they will always need the funding to be able to have those types of programs. And I have seen them work. I have seen students feel comfortable in programs that are designed especially for them. Then they know they are welcome. It can make the parents feel welcome and to feel that they can be part of the system no matter what language they speak. In that respect, if the school district really wants to communicate with the Hispanic community and the Spanish speaking community, then they are going to need people in every area that they are who will be able to speak Spanish. And be able to communicate not only on a linguistic level, but a cultural level as well.

JO: Was your first language that you learned Spanish or English?

RM: In the home my first language was English and then Spanish. My father was actually a Spanish teacher and a bilingual instructor in the Detroit area. So we grew up with

both languages in the home, but they did emphasize the English language. And of course in the area where I grew up, my family was one of the few Hispanic families in a far lower concentration of Hispanics. So the schools were primarily non-Hispanic students. And that's my communication was and English was my first language because it was everybody else's language.

JO: Alright do you consider yourself fluent in both languages?

RM: No I don't. I consider myself probably more fluent in English and having lost a lot of what I should have had in the area of Spanish during my elementary and high school years. Then when I got back into college again the concentration of Hispanics was greater or the need to gather as Hispanics was greater in college because of the need for support. And there wasn't until those college years where the Spanish was coming back into more use, and we use it you gain more honor, you get better at it. When that use isn't there it doesn't help at all. Then when I got to Holland the use increased when I was in the paper and then even more so when I came to Upward Bound, the contact that we have with many of the parents that are bilingual but preferably will speak in Spanish. So it has been an educational experience for me. It makes me have to be able to give back to that. It feels like something that I have lost that is being returned to me.

JO: What were your first impressions of the city of Holland?

RM: My first impressions were probably pretty much like everybody else's. Tulip Time. Tulips all over the place, windmills all over the place. Actually my first impression was a city that was proud of its cultural heritage and willing to share in its culture, but

also a city that was trying to hide another culture underneath that was visibly present, but not in the same degree that Dutch culture was presenting. Then I came to see that's a tourist thing. That is what Holland is known for. That's what people come here to see. It is up to Hispanics themselves to make themselves known here. To make their presence known. So that had been increasing too. And then the city has been more reflective of that and recognizing the presence of Hispanics here. So my first impression that there was a dominant culture here, a dominant minority, and a not so dominant minority in the population but that changed.

JO: Did you notice the suppression of Hispanic culture and Hispanic people so to speak within Holland right off the bat or did it take a while to notice it?

RM: Yes, pretty much right off the bat. When I came to Holland when I was doing research at the paper as so far as the background of Hispanics to see how little was written in the paper, trying to dig up occurrences in the past. And it turned out in my time at the Sentinel more was written by me and Hispanics in one month that had been done in one year in previous years. So that tells me that if it wasn't a blatant attempt to cover this culture then it was just an inibulence of what was happening in their own community.

JO: So were your impressions overall positive, overall negative, or just sort of in the middle?

RM: They were very positive because of the number of Hispanic people in here who were willing to work together here to make a difference. Very positive, it was very positive. Even so when we brought in people from outside of Michigan to speak to

the people here, Hispanic people, to kind of encourage them to take an active role in the city and the schools. And their impressions of the city where that here is a community of people, community of Hispanics who are willing to get together and get something done, which is a lot different then the areas where they come where they have high numbers of Hispanics but not enough of ones that are doing something to make a difference in their area. Here we have not a high number, but a high concentration willing to do something. And so in that respect very positive, very positive. Then the Anglo community many of the school administrators and city officials willing to sit down and talk and make those changes, to facilitate and address any Hispanics. That is what I have seen. I have seen more and more every social agency makes an effort to address the needs of Hispanics. But one thing that is lacking is participation of Hispanics in all these different social agencies. Someone should be on staff, just like someone should be on staff in teachers in schools. Someone should be on staff in the agencies if they really want to meet the needs of Hispanics.

JO: What were the major problems you encountered in Holland as a Hispanic? Do you ever feel you were discriminated against and if so what forms of discrimination did you...?

RM: Very subtle things. I would guess from the generations that preceded their impressions of Hispanics, they did run into some people just thinking in old fashion ways. Once in a while people would make comments not knowing that they were offensive, things like that. It is difficult for anybody to really say or admit that they

have experienced racism or discrimination from one because you don't want to bring that out and say that about somebody, and two the other person that might be doing it might just be ignorant about the fact that they were offending somebody. But it astounded me that were still in that same kind of mode. But now we must be realistic to the fact that although there are people that are accepting of other cultures there are others that are not.

JO: Were you ever physically intimidated?

RM: No, not here in Holland. In fact, that was another impression of mine coming from Detroit and then coming from Kalamazoo also, that Holland was just a clean town, and I couldn't believe that the cars were off the streets at night. Just amazing to me how proper it was.

JO: Do you ever feel there is racial tension in Holland? Has there ever been a civil rights movement of some sort within the Hispanic community to confront the Anglo community about the problems?

RM: There has been. There have been a number of times where the Hispanics felt that their needs were falling on deaf ears whether it be the school, the city, the police, retailers. But this is a community where they will voice an opinion. So, yeah, I have seen a number of confrontations. I have also seen them within the schools. I think there are a lot of kids that do a good job of sharing each others culture. But again, there are those who are raised by parents who are not so accepting of different cultures who inherit the prejudices, and that is unfortunate to see.

JO: Do you feel Holland is divided into two Hollands, a Hispanic Holland and an Anglo

Holland? Or do you think it is a little more congealed then that?

RM: I think there is a mixture because of a need for, I think even three cultures, the Asian culture that is also here. Very dominant presence. The same as Hispanics, a very dominant presence. And they are distinct because they hold on to their cultures. I see meshes in a lot of the celebrations that includes like the Liberty Fest that is coming up that can put a number of cultures in exchanges, but in the regular day-to-day living of families, the traditions that are brought with them from their own heritage are strongly held. And in that respect, yes there are divisions. But in the respect of living in certain areas or having certain jobs, I really don't see divisions. Although there are needs to increase number of administrators, number of engineers. You know there is a number of people working in the factories, but there is a need to increase the number of managerial positions of Hispanics. But I see that opening too now. I see it there.

JO: What does the Hispanic community offer to Holland and what has it offered to Holland in the past?

RM: The Hispanic community has to offer just their cultural heritage. They're sharing everything about their culture. It is not something they want to keep to themselves. Something that is open that they want to share with everyone else. They have got the same valuable intrinsic qualities that every human being has to offer. Just like other parents would be, Hispanic parents have a strong need to want to be involved in the education system, even more so. I talked to a number of people who were not Michigan natives, from Texas and other states, were Hispanic, told me the reason that

they came here because their kids could get a better education here in Michigan than they could in Texas. And to have the courage to uproot your whole family, to leave behind your relatives, to make a new life, because you want something better for your kids really takes a lot. And I think people could take a good look at that and learn a good lesson.

JO: Can you think of anything else that the Hispanic community has offered in the past, like when you first came here to Holland?

RM: They offer them a large purchasing base. Hispanics are just like everyone else. They buy the same cars, and the same goods that everyone else does. There are retailers out there or there are businesses out there that open their doors to Hispanics or do something special to recognize their individualness and Hispanics will respond. They are organized enough to know where someone would be treating them well.

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

RM: At this point, I really don't belong to any organizations other than Upward Bound. I had at one time, but Upward Bound tends to be very consuming of a position. So I have been on temporary boards in the past for schools, communication committees. I have been involved with the Holland Chamber of Commerce. I have been with the Hispanic Task Force that was addressing all the needs in different areas. I was addressing needs of education and college preparation for Hispanics. I have been involved with various organizations that created conferences for grassroots Hispanic people so that at a grassroots level get them more involved in politics and in

education. Involved in some of the other civic organizations and then been a guest at a number of social agency boards, action groups who would want to increase their level of effectiveness in the Hispanic community.

JO: Have you ever been active in Latin Americans United for Progress?

RM: I have been involved with them, or participated in their conferences or functions that they are affiliated with. But have never been an all standing member.

JO: What would you really like to see changed in the city of Holland in reference to the Hispanic community?

RM: I would like to see an effort made by those agencies, businesses, corporations, schools who want to increase the number of employees in administrative positions to put forth an effort to train people who can be the managers and the administrators of tomorrow. That way there could never be a kind of cop out plea to say we can't find qualified people. They themselves don't make an effort in qualifying people to be there someday when then need them.

JO: Do most Hispanics want these same changes you would like?

RM: Oh definitely. And some are satisfied with what they have, but the majority aren't and there are others that would demand much more.

JO: How much more would they demand?

RM: Well I would say if there are any and there are that feel they have experienced prejudice, who have experienced bias, have had any bad experience that they want to have changes instituted, whatever area it may be where they would feel some satisfaction.

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

RM: I would see on the horizon an increased activity by Hispanics in all areas. Social, agencies, and the schools. And I also see an increase in corporate support of Hispanic education. And I have already gotten somewhat of a response from corporations who realize the fact that a large base of their employee population is Hispanic. And they want the children of that population to be educated, to be college educated, to be college graduates, to come back in the community and give something back. And I can see that movement growing and growing. Where we are about the business of guaranteeing a good future for this community that has a lot input from the Hispanics.

JO: So you see the Anglo community accepting Hispanics as part and that they are willing to give the Hispanics more prestigious jobs?

RM: Definitely. I see them recognizing the Hispanic community as a resource, a valuable resource.

JO: So there is no longer the resistance, the Hispanics moving forward...

RM: Exactly. And also an increased experience where Hispanics are showing themselves to be very competent in higher up positions.

JO: Thank you very much, Mr. Muniz.