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Reyes, Lupita Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

Joseph O'Grady

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Interview with Lupita Reyes
Interviewed by Joseph O'Grady, 1990

JO: When did you first arrive in Holland?

LR: My parents and I arrived in Holland in 1945.

JO: Where was your first place of residence within Holland?

LR: My first place of residence was east 9th Street, way at the end near Western Foundry.

JO: Was it a nice place or sort of run-down?

LR: In those days it was a nice place. Actually my stepfather's uncle owned the home and then that's how we got here because my stepfather's uncle told him that the job opportunities were real good here. So we came, my stepfather came first and then my mother and I came. We lived upstairs in the house and there were like, five people that lived downstairs and then my stepfather, my mother and myself. So it was about eight people living in the house.

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

LR: Yes, there was a fairly nice neighborhood. I remember we came over in a truck and the driver of the truck, it was his job to drop us off where ever we were going and as I got off the truck, this little girl was talking to me. Of course I didn't understand because I didn't understand English at that time. All the neighbors in that area were non-Hispanic. But it was a fairly nice neighborhood.

JO: How old were you when you first arrived?

LR: When I first arrived I was six years-old.

JO: Where did you originally come from?

LR: I was born in Loutown, Texas, and for the short time that I remained in Texas I lived in Laferia, Texas, which is the southern most part of Texas, they called the Valley.

JO: That's near Brownsville right?

LR: Yes, near Brownsville, Texas.

JO: That's where Ted Silva came from, so it's a small town basically, sort of rural?

LR: Actually, Ted Silva comes from the same town I think. [laughter] Rural, close to the border, if you go there today if you blink you'll miss it, that kinda thing, one blinker light.

JO: What did your parents do in Laferia?

LR: My stepfather worked as a mason and my mother worked cleaning houses.

JO: Did your father continue being a mason when he came to Holland?

LR: When he came to Holland he started working for a company called Northern Woods, which was located on east 6th Street, that would be Columbia and 6th, which is now Baker Furniture's Museum. That's where Northern Woods used to be. He went to work there.

JO: Did your mom work there as well...?

LR: No, my mother worked in a laundry, as a presser operator. That was at the Warm Friend, a hotel then today it's a senior citizen's residence.

JO: How many people came with you from Laferia?

LR: There were about fifteen of us in the truck.

JO: All your relatives?

LR: Yes, relatives, an aunt, two cousins and my mother and myself. That was the only ties

there. The rest of the people I didn't know, they weren't family members.

JO: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

LR: I don't have any brothers and sisters, I'm an only child. That's unusual for Hispanics.

JO: What were the conditions in Laferia that brought your parents to Holland?

LR: I believe the conditions were such that employment wasn't readily available. Or if there was, it didn't pay. Certainly the opportunity to make more money was one of the reasons that brought my stepfather over here.

JO: What was your first job in the city?

LR: Before I graduated I was a dishwasher in a restaurant, Hoffman's Restaurant. Then at that same restaurant I became a waitress. I started washing dishes when I was eleven years old and I started waiting on tables when I was thirteen. Then after I got married my first real job was working at Heinz in Zeeland working on the pickle belt just sorting pickles. There after I didn't work, I stayed home to raise my family until later on, after they were grown up, then I went to work as a sales clerk at JC Penneys. Then I became a legal secretary for one of the attorney's in town. Then I worked for an answering service and I was a billing clerk for a trucking company. Then I retired from work and went back to school, went to Grand Valley for three and a half years. I did a four year program in three and a half years because I went to school year round. Then when I graduated from Grand Valley, before I graduated I had the job already, at Holland Community Hospital.

JO: Where are you employed now and what position do you hold?

LR: Currently I'm employed at Holland Community Hospital and I am the Clinical

Supervisor of Patients and Family Counseling.

JO: How long have you held this position?

LR: About a year.

JO: Did you attend any school in Holland?

LR: I attended Holland Public Elementary, Holland Junior High, Holland High School. Then on to Grand Valley and then Western.

JO: What were your impressions of the school system, when you were there and as you grew up?

LR: Looking back on the Holland Public School system sometimes brings back some good memories, but a lot of it is also bad memories. I spent many, many years being held back and being labeled as developmentally disabled or retarded until one teacher took an interest in me and said, "No, this child is not retarded, she just doesn't know how to speak English." And this teacher worked with me one on one, then I begin to master the language. If it had not been for this teacher I would have been placed in special education class for slow learners or whatever. After this teacher worked with me I began to pick up the language and then I excelled in school. I did quite well throughout my elementary school years and into the junior high and high school. When I graduated in high school I graduated with a 3.0 grade average, which is fairly good, not the top, but it's fairly good. So my impressions of the school system, they didn't have bilingual education which was in those days, I think would have been very helpful. I wouldn't have felt so lonely, the self-esteem that I lost because I felt myself as being stupid and that I wasn't capable of learning, so the hardest person on me was

myself.

JO: What grade were you in when they held you back, when they were labeling you as learning disabled?

LR: Second grade.

JO: How long did they keep you in that program?

LR: They kept me there for about three years.

JO: Three years? So up until 5th grade then?

LR: Well, they held me back, in those days they would hold you back, today they'll pass you on to another grade, but in those days they would hold you back and you would repeat the same grade over and over. So I certainly, again psychologically the impact that that had on me in those days was that I was no good and that I was stupid.

That's the message I got. Looking back now I often think, "What if these people had been in a school system that only Spanish was spoken?" They would also come off as being stupid, or looking that way.

JO: Were there other Hispanics in the program?

LR: I was the only one, at that time.

JO: In the whole entire school or just in that grade?

LR: In that area, there were other Hispanics I'm sure. I think that Becky Loeta and her parents here arrived here about the same time and there was a family by the last name of Gonzales that lived on 13th Street. So there were some families here, but they all experienced basically the same problem, the problem was that our language ability was not as good as they wanted it to be and so we were labeled as being slow.

JO: So you didn't know any English when you arrived, how did you pick up most of your English? Did you pick it up through school or just daily life?

LR: It's a combination of all things. I believe that the teacher who helped me inspired me. I think if I really think about it she was my mentor. I looked up to her because she took the time and cared about me to show me the correct way of saying things. Actually, I became her pet. She was known as a tyrant of Lincoln School, she was principal and nobody liked her because she was quite mean so the kids would say. I didn't find her to be that way. She was very loving and understanding and she really helped me to begin to understand the concepts of the language. As time went on I developed friendships and through those friendships I began to master the language and of course being in school and using it more and more, I became very fluent in it. By the time I go to the 8th grade I had forgotten how to speak Spanish correctly. I was an only child and my mother was always working and my stepfather was always working, so all the communication that I did was in English. My mother would get home from work and she'd be very tired and I'd speak very little Spanish to her so by the time I was in the 8th grade I was speaking mostly English and then no Spanish. Then by that time more and more Hispanics were coming over here and settling down. I would meet Hispanic kids and they would make fun of me because I couldn't pronounce my Spanish well, I was really mangling it. I felt very bad, so I started to pick up on the Spanish again and really practice at it. So today I can do both quite well.

JO: So you basically spoke English at home with your mom and dad?

LR: Yes.

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

LR: I thought Holland was a very beautiful town, I felt like I was in a fairy land. It was such a clean town and flowers all over. It just looked like a storybook to me when I arrived. I thought it was a beautiful town. It struck me as being a beautiful, clean town, and today it still is. I believe that Holland is the kind of town where I want to remain to raise my family because it offers the best of everything, Lake Michigan nearby is a beautiful lake, I know some people think that the fish and everything else, it's beautiful. Holland is a clean town. I've traveled around and I've seen some towns that are not as clean. But above all I think that the people who live in Holland are caring people. I think the religious beliefs that they have in this town sometimes help to resolve some of the problems that exist. You can go to other towns and you find racism alive and it's there, racism of course is alive in Holland, but I believe, I truly believe that in Holland you can resolve those issues in a much...I guess in an understanding way, you can work with people in this town. I've worked with many people in this town and there have been some people who've been truly, very, bigoted, but many, many of the people I've worked with are real, true Christians and that shows. It just feels good to work with people like that. I just feel comfortable in this town.

JO: Did your visions, those first storybook visions of Holland, did that change for the time being as you were in high school or college? Did you ever have a negative view of Holland?

LR: Yes, it changed. When I tried to find jobs as a teenager, being turned down for a job simply because my last name was _____ and not Van Dyke certainly hurt. In those days I didn't see it as bad. It hurt, and I felt like, okay, once again it was "you're not good enough to get that job." What really hurt I think the most and when I begin to become very active in changing things was when I went to apply for a job at JC Penneys, I did get the job, but the manager point blank told me, "Look, I'm going out on a limb. I've never hired a Mexican before so I'm going out on a limb by hiring you." So he was doing me a favor, he was giving me a job, but I had to work twice as hard to prove that I was worthy of being hired. And no one else did that. I would look around and some of the other employees were not working as hard as I was and I thought, "Why is this? Why this unequal balance here?" And that's when I began to get involved, to change things because I felt that, that's not the way for human beings to live. So I went at it with a vengeance I began to volunteer and do many, many things. When I would try to get jobs like at Social Services or something I was always told, "Well, Lu, you've got all the qualifications, but you don't have the education. So I thought, "Ok, I can't complain about something, if I don't have the education to meet the criteria to be hired. I can't accuse these people of being discriminatory because I don't have the education." So I went back to school. First of all, when I was in high school, I was told I wasn't college material because I didn't have the grades to get into college. That's what they told me. So when I went to apply at Grand Valley, I just went over there on a whim and said, "Look, I want to go to school - I don't have money and I don't have the grades to get

into college," because that's what they told me when I was in high school. The lady who talked to me said, "Go back to Holland, get us a transcript of your grades, let's take a look at that." So I think I must have been crazy that day and they must have thought I was crazy too. I came all the way back to Holland, went to Holland High, asked for a transcript of my grades and of course they give it to you in a sealed envelope with a little seal in the back so you don't _____ it, you can't change the grades, I guess. I went all the way back to Grand Valley and the lady was very surprised to see me in the same day, so she knew I really wanted to go to school. And she opened it and she said, "Now why couldn't you go to college?" I said, "Well, I don't have the grades, that's what they told me." She said, "Well, you could have gotten into any college, or most colleges with the grade point average that you had." Because I had a 3.0 and I had taken French, Spanish, Biology, Psych, it wasn't the easy courses that I took. So she said, "You could have gotten into college." That made me angry, and my anger turned into, not getting even with the system but to devoting myself to studying because I was going prove to these people that I was college material. So I went to school year round at Grand Valley and when I graduated, I graduated with a 4.0 grade average. Then, what I really wanted to do was take my grade point average and shove it in their nose. Of course, it wouldn't have done any good anyway. My anger calmed down and then I got my job at Holland Hospital. I guess when you look back at things like that, I was lucky that my anger didn't turn out to be more the type where you want to strike out at society because a lot of people who become angry and you see them in prison today are

tearing down and burning down buildings, that's how their anger is manifested. I was very fortunate that my anger manifested itself into studying and making something out of myself. So I did, I went back got the education then I said, "Okay, here I am. I have a degree now, now can I have a job?" Well, I landed the job at Holland Hospital, but still again, it was, I felt it, that I always was put on a, under a microscope to make sure that I was doing as well. They never said it, but I perceived it and I felt it and it was just a funny feeling that I always felt that I had to do better. Then after two years of Holland Hospital, I decided I want to do better yet. So I went back and enrolled in the Master's program at Western Michigan University for a Master's in Social Work. I didn't do quite as well academically, I got a 3.6, kinda low there. [laughter] Then I came back to Holland, I was still at Holland Hospital so I was working 40 hours a week, going to school and raising a family. And believe me, I know now when people say it's hard to go to school and work. I can tell you that it is. But I can also tell you that it wasn't wasted and that I believe that my education has really got me to where I am today. I left Holland Hospital and worked for Catholic Human Development, starting up a program for them, a counseling program through mental health for Hispanics because I believe that mental health is an area where we lack services to the Hispanic population throughout the United States. I worked for them for two years and then Holland Hospital had a job opening and they said, "Look, we've got this job." So I went back. Then I was promoted to the supervisor position.

JO: What were some of the major problems you encountered in Holland? Were you ever

confronted by a non-Hispanic within the community violently?

LR: Yes, when my husband and I were first married we tried to find a home and we couldn't, no one would rent to us because we were Hispanic, so we had a tough time finding a house. Then later on I stood up and made an issue among the Commissioners at Ottawa County Board of Commissioners made a statement about Hispanics and I drew attention to that and made a big issue of it. Then there were people who were putting letters in my mailbox saying, "Why don't you go back to where you came from? Either you straighten up or we're gonna burn a cross in your yard." So yes, those kinds of things did happen. But it didn't stop me, I'm not one of those people who scares off easily.

JO: Did you feel at any moment in Holland there was racial tension, was there a civil rights movement of any sort in the Hispanic community? Was there ever a moment the Hispanic community sort of stood up and tried to force it's will on...?

LR: Well not force its will, but I believe that yes there was a time when the Hispanic community in Holland banded together to bring about issues that were of concern to them and they banded together to get some resolution. Certainly standing behind the Holland's fair housing code. We got together and formed an organization which is Latin Americans United for Progress which is still in existence. That organization was always on the lookout for things like better educational programs for Hispanics, changing the way that educators tested Hispanic students to put them into the special education program. We banded together and it changed because we put some force on that, getting together and putting some force or pressure on the Board of Education to

hire a school counselor for the Holland Public Schools. There again, getting together and bringing to issue the fact that one of the Councilman made a slur remark about naming one of the streets in Holland "Wetback" Street. And we brought it to Council and we got together and we said, "No, if you're in your own private little world with your friends, you can make any kind of remark you want, but when you are sitting up there representing the people of Holland, there's no way you can be allowed to make those kinds of remarks and get away with it."

JO: What was your reaction to the Dutch-Anglo community when the Hispanics started to band together so to speak, to defend themselves against discrimination in Holland? Was it a positive reaction, a negative reaction?

LR: Mine was positive because I was there, helping to make that movement, helping to create that. My concern was that we did not want to see another Grand Rapids with the burning and that. That was not the intent of getting together. The intent was to work together with the other people in Holland to make this a better community for all people, not just for the Dutch. I believe that we have succeeded in that, and again you can't have a perfect community, there's no such thing, but as I told you before I think this community has the potential and I see it in how we work. My husband is the coordinator for Home for the Homeless and how people have banded together to make _____, which is the second home for the homeless a reality. Seeing people, non-Hispanics and Hispanics work together to make this a reality for the homeless shows me that, yes, we've done something and it's ok. It's ok for people to have their biases about different groups, as long as you don't allow those feelings to

interfere with your hiring someone or your renting a home to someone. You can have your biases, there's nothing wrong with them, we all do...but I believe that you can't bring them into reality or to use them against other people.

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

LR: In the past, when I first arrived here and in subsequent years, they didn't have a lot to offer, until the movement began, which was in the early and mid '60s, right in there.

JO: And lasted until?

LR: Currently. Then things began to change and what we offered to Holland is to share our culture through our fiesta and that was the beginning to share the Hispanic culture, through our fiesta, to expose other people who are not Hispanic to what we really are. Our leaders that we have in this community have become very involved in Holland and offered their views and their input to make this a better community, to change a school system so that all students can have a good education. When I look at it, we've really been working side by side with the "Anglo" community to make this a better community for all of us. So in that way I feel we have contributed. We have contributed to in other ways, police officers who are now working for the Holland Police Department, so we have those talents, those people who are working there, teachers who are working within the school system, social workers and many, many talents of the Hispanics that are now here in Holland instead of going somewhere else, we're keeping those people here.

JO: What organizations do you belong to?

LR: LAUP, I also belong to the Crisis Team for the Holland Public Schools, which is a group of professionals who are together and look at the potential crisis that exists within the Holland Public School system. I also belong to Partners for Better Education for West Ottawa Public Schools. That is a task force, looking at ways that we can enter into partnership with business, industry and _____ services to give students an opportunity to practice or to become part and to spend some time there and pick up some ideas of what it's like to be in a factory or what it's like to be in a business, so I'm currently working on that. I've purposely have pulled myself out of many, many organizations and boards that I was sitting on because I went back to school again and so I had to have to time to study, otherwise I'd be gone every single night. So right now those are my main ones that I'm on, but I believe that, this is only my first few months that I've been out of school, so probably by next year I'll be up to my head in commitments to different organizations again.

JO: What would you like to see changed in Holland towards the Hispanic community?

LR: What I'd like to see changed, of course, is that there are some people still that have a negative view of Hispanics, they think that anyone who speaks Spanish is automatically a Mexican. We need to educate the community that not everyone who speaks Spanish is Mexican, there are Puerto Ricans, Cubans, South Americans, Central Americans, even Spaniards from Europe. We need to educate the community in understanding that people who are Hispanic are American citizens. People look at me and they say, "You're Mexican." I'm not a Mexican, I was born in the United States, that makes me an American. People need to understand that no matter what

color you are, black, Oriental, if you're born in that country you are either an American, a Mexican, a Chinese, or whatever, that's your origin, country of origin. Now if you ask me what my ethnic background is, it's Mexican. But my citizenship is American, I am an American and when I hear people say, "Why don't you go back to where you came from?" that hurts because a lot of Hispanics shed their blood for the American flag and not too many people recognize those things. So that's what I would like to see changed. I'd like to see us not talk to our kids, educate them, imbed in their little minds a prejudice against other people. We do it simply when we say, "Did you see that spic?" And we use words like that, or that lazy Mexican. Kids pick that up. When we put in front of our yards the little Mexican sitting under the _____ tree, little kids see that and it goes into their minds, it's imbedded into their mind as all Mexicans are dark, dark-haired, lazy, all Mexicans carry knives. That isn't true. All Mexicans use drugs. We think we need to educate people to those misconceptions, they need to be educated so they are corrected. All Mexicans are on welfare. If you really look at the welfare rolls, it's very little. And why are some of these people on welfare, because they can't find a job. I think we need to change all those things. It's not going to happen overnight, it's going to take time. It's going to take education and those of us Hispanics who are working in the community, that is our task, is to educate and to stay in there and be part of the community and that's how we are going to educate.

JO: Do most Hispanics agree with these changes that you would like to see? What would their views on it?

LR: Well they wouldn't be necessarily exactly like mine, but I can tell you that if you talk to Al Gonzales maybe his views will be somewhat like mine, maybe worded differently but you'd see some similarities. I believe that Becky Loeta and probably Al Serrano might come out with the same kinds of things. I think it depends on the level which people are at. I would believe that would be true of non-Hispanics. If you talk to a non-Hispanic that works in a factory, they might tell you that they'd like to see better work conditions in factories and what ever. If you're talking to a professional non-Hispanic they might be more global and talk to you about other things. I would say that would be true, it depends on the educational level, it depends what their needs are. I think each one of us is going to talk about what we see as our needs or the needs of the community, and each of us perceives those needs differently depending on where we're at.

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

LR: For the future of Holland, I see more and more Hispanics becoming more politically involved. Certainly the move to register more Hispanics is there and Hispanics are now more aware of what their political power can be. I see more Hispanic professionals in the community. But I also see that we need to work on the drop-out rates in schools, certainly it's very high and we need to change that somehow. I think I see a change in that, that we need to work with the schools to change that. I think those are the changes that I see in the future. By the year 1999, one fourth of this country is going to be Spanish speaking. That means that those of us who do not speak English or do not understand the culture will need to get educated in order to

meet the needs of that population. Hispanics are a young population, they're the ones that are producing the babies. The non-Hispanics are not having babies, not as much. So the future, although some people don't want to see it that way, relies within the Hispanic population of this country. We're gonna have to learn to work together. I see a trend for the future where we're going to see a lot of Hispanics delivering services to non-Hispanics.

JO: Do you still see discrimination in Holland? Has discrimination ended or does it still continue?

LR: Discrimination all over this country, all over the world, is never going to end as long as there are people on earth, there will always be what we call discrimination. But I like a better word, misunderstanding. I think people are not prejudice, they just don't understand and they're afraid of the unknown. They tend to pull away from what they don't know. There will always be that. People are different and they cannot live in harmony together, they just cannot. Even people of the same ethnic background cannot live in harmony, there's always some differences in those groups. Yes, differences, misunderstandings are certainly alive in Holland. They're masked now differently because you certainly can't go and say to someone, "I'm sorry I'm not going to rent you my house because you're Mexican," or "I'm sorry I can't hire you because you're Mexican." But there are other ways of getting around it, so it's still there.

JO: Is Holland racial divided or do you think it's still one community? Or is it two communities, one Hispanic one Dutch?

LR: Holland, because of the influx of people coming in with all the industry that's here is becoming multi-ethnic. There are people here, just go out in the street and start talking to them and you'll find out there are a lot of newcomers, particularly the northside, for instance. I believe that we have more and more people here of different ethnic groups so I think it's pretty well divided. We don't have as many blacks here. We have a large Indo-Chinese population, a large Hispanic population of course. Then all those other people. So I believe it's _____.

JO: I just want to backtrack back into your background again. Was your family migrants? Did they work in the fields?

LR: Before coming to settle in Holland we worked in the fields and even after we were here when my stepfather was laid off from work we worked topping _____ onions, picking pickles, picking cherries, so we worked in the fields, picking tomatoes.

JO: What was the first town in Michigan that you traveled to?

LR: It was in Ohio, we went to Freemont, Ohio.

JO: How did you get to Holland from there?

LR: What happened is that we came to Holland and my stepfather had a job in a factory, but then he got laid off. Then here in Holland we stayed around and worked here in the different farms out toward Allegan county and then here. And from here we went to Ohio and then came back here.

JO: What in Holland attracted your family?

LR: Family, there was family here.

JO: Thank you very much, Mrs. Reyes.