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Serrano, Alberto R Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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Interview with Alberto Serrano
By Joseph O'Grady, 1990

JO: When did you first arrive in Holland?

AS: I arrived in Holland when I was three years old, going on four. I was born in 1951, so that would make it about 1955.

JO: Do you remember your first place of residence?

AS: Yes, I believe the address was 375 North Division, north in Holland Township.

JO: What condition was the neighborhood in when you first settled in there?

AS: Well, let me back up. We moved in temporarily, I believe it was in Drenthe. My grandparents, and my aunts and uncles came here as migrants and my parents came over to visit and they found jobs immediately so we stayed. Now that address I gave you 375 North Division is the address that I remember, because being three years or four years old you don't remember that much.

JO: Again I'll just ask you, what was the condition of the neighborhood at 375 Division?

AS: Well I can tell you that the condition of the neighborhood, it really wasn't a neighborhood at the time when we moved in. It was basically a cluster of cinder block, one-room homes. Right now, if you look at them as they exist, they are no bigger than your regular one stall garage. There was a pump fixture inside the sink. The heating was fuel oil heating, with a furnace on the main floor. There wasn't much; there were no other rooms except for a partition for one of the bedrooms. It was no bigger than this room with whatever measurements they might be. Hard to believe. And you know it had a kitchen area, a small kitchen area. It had just a couple of bedroom areas. It seemed bigger at the time when I was a little kid, but

when I go back there and visit and take a look at the place, it's kind of hard to believe that we lived there. There were nine in our family; my two parents, I have five brothers and myself is six, and one girl. She is the youngest and I am the oldest and we're ten years apart.

JO: Oh wow, big difference. Now where did you originally come from?

AS: Come from Austin, Texas. I don't think I quite completely described the neighborhood. Like I said it wasn't a neighborhood. It was kind of a cluster of cinder block homes. Most of the Hispanics came and moved into those. It was a group of four, small, little homes. And then in the surrounding area, that's where they developed subdivisions. So we were kind of in an island. It was surrounded by woods, so it was somewhat secluded and they built subdivisions all around us.

JO: Were all your neighbors of Hispanic descent?

AS: No, they were white. Well, the ones that lived in that cluster were all Hispanic. But the subdivisions were all white.

JO: Back to you originally came from Texas?

AS: Austin, Texas.

JO: Were you in a rural or urban area?

AS: Well, we were in an urban area. It was basically on the side of the tracks where the Mexican people lived. The white people lived on one side which is the affluent side and you usually have the railroad tracks which is kind of a physical boundary. You have the Mexican neighborhood which is quite big, and then after that was the black neighborhood. And they were distinct, pretty separate neighborhoods.

JO: So your family had an urban background before they came to Holland?

AS: Yes, I would say so. Austin wasn't really that big at that time.

JO: Why did you come to Holland?

AS: We came to Holland because my father was the only one working. My mother wasn't working and she couldn't get a job in Austin. And the wages were very, very low. It was difficult to support a family. They originally came because my mother's cousin who was in the armed forces had a leave of absence and he wanted to come and see his aunt, which happened to be my mother's mother. And they just suddenly left. Just picked up and left for Michigan in a car, and when we got here my parents decided to look for jobs in the city of Holland. My father got a job with Smith & Douglas Fertilizer plant. Now, I think it is Borden Fertilizer. My mother got a job with Ideal Cleaners which still exists on 6th Street and Central Avenue. And since they both got immediate jobs, they were making more money then they ever made in Texas so there was no reason to go back and we stayed.

JO: So the conditions in Austin were pretty poor in the job market?

AS: The job market was poor, yes.

JO: So that was the basis for you leaving?

AS: Well, another reason my father tells me is he also had concern about bringing up his children. At that point he had three young boys and my father always got into some kind of problems and he just didn't want that kind of life for his children. So that was part of the reason that also convinced him to stay in Michigan because it would take the children and himself out of that environment.

JO: What was your first job in the city?

AS: Well, my first job actually was when I was six years old. My grandparents were migrants picking pickles, tomatoes, cherries, and blueberries. They would go off to the migrant camps and move into the migrant camps in north Ottawa County. They would basically live in these small, little houses maybe a little smaller than what we lived in but not much more and they would work the blueberry season. And as a young kid my grandparents offered me the opportunity to go with them. I was about six or seven, somewhere around there. It was my job to pick the bottom of the blueberry bushes, because they were older and they couldn't stoop down, and it was easier for me to do that. I liked going because it was fun being out there with the kids. You know with kids it really isn't work. Basically I got paid \$1 a week. It was just an allowance. And I went out there, I thought I worked pretty hard but I didn't have any concept of money. I knew that I was just helping and working and I enjoyed myself. So every year for a number of years, three or four years, I went and would help my grandmother and my aunts and uncles on the blueberry farms. As I got older, of course, I got to keep the money I earned. But then that money would be turned over to my dad for family expenses. I would get a small allowance.

JO: So how long did you work in the fields then?

AS: Well, from that point on and as my brothers got older they joined me, so I was kind of their supervisor. It was my brothers Dave, Joe, and Ernie. Ernie is second oldest and Dave is third oldest and then Joe is after that. It was primarily us four. We worked all the way up through junior high. Primarily picking blueberries, seasonal

work. We did try picking pickles and cherries here and there, but that didn't work out very well.

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

AS: I am employed for the City of Holland, and I am the Director of Human Relations and Equal Employment Opportunity.

JO: Do you deal basically with Hispanics or with all different races within the community?

AS: The Human Relations Commission was formed in 1966 as a result of racial tensions back then. The riots, burning of cities, Grand Rapids you know was burned at one time, so was Detroit. But you don't hear too much about Grand Rapids because it wasn't as big as Detroit. But there was a lot of racial violence in Grand Rapids.

Although there were not a lot of blacks here, there was a significant Hispanic population, and so I think the Human Relations Commission was founded with the intention of trying to develop good relationships with the Hispanic community.

Because that was primarily the minority group here, and it still is. Essentially I think that the Human Relations Director position was viewed as a Hispanic position. A Hispanic position because the Human Relations Commission in many respects would be dealing with the Hispanic community. But that was also at a time when civil rights was limited to race and national origin. Very few protected groups. Within the last 10 years, those groups have expanded to include women, sex discrimination, marital status, handicapped, age, national origin, religion, so it covers everybody. The Human Relations Commission's mandate is to provide fair treatment for everybody in the community especially protecting their civil rights, and since we have all of those

protected classes, we have to serve everybody. I believe they have had a history of having Hispanics in the position. I think it is because of the significant number of Hispanics in this community and beneficial to have a bilingual Hispanic person who is sensitive to the culture. I don't disagree, but you can't say that a non-Hispanic couldn't do a good job, I believe they could. I just think that people feel that it is important to have somebody to identify with and somebody who may be sensitive to the issues that impact Hispanics in this community.

JO: How long have you held this position for?

AS: Ten and a half years, since December of 1979. But you mentioned what was my first job, I'm not so sure you expected to hear that I was working in the blueberry fields.

JO: No, I didn't. Not at six years old.

AS: My first official job in terms of having to earn my own living was...well it was for a short time at Herman Miller that I worked for six weeks in furniture assembly and chair assembly. In high school, I was a co-op student, which meant that I worked half-days and went to school half-days and I would get credit for my work, but I also would get paid. I worked for De Pree Pharmaceutical working in their advertising department as a stock-keeper of all their advertising. All the salesmen would send me their orders for advertisements and displays and I would put together the manuals and displays, gather all of the advertising they wanted, package it and ship it out. So that was essentially my first experience in terms of the work world outside of the migrant experience.

JO: Did you attend any school in Holland?

AS: Yes. On the north side I went to three elementary schools that were on Lakewood Boulevard. Then we were bused every year from one school to the next. It was mostly because of the location where we lived. It wasn't just us that were Hispanics, but it was all the neighborhood kids. They were always bused to Glerum School, Waukazoo School and Lakewood. They were all on the same street but separated. Every year we would be bused to a different school. From the north side we moved into Holland and I went to Washington School in fifth grade.

JO: What were your impressions of the Holland school system?

AS: I enjoyed my time going to school. The only problem that I had in school was that I was held back in first grade. The reason I was held back was because the teacher felt that socially it would be better if I was held back one year because I was too short.

JO: You were too short?

AS: Yeah. They thought that everybody was taller and maturing faster than I and it would be better if I stayed one year to give me a chance to mature. As I remember I probably was somewhat of a shy kid around the teacher, but around the kids I wasn't shy at all. So that might have affected her decision in terms of saying that I wasn't socially developed enough to move on to the next grade and that size had a lot to do with it. It didn't bother me. The only thing that bothered me thinking about it back then was that teachers have done that to a lot of kids because of size. They don't do that anymore because I think they accept that is just the way things are. The only thing that I remember was that my parents no matter what the teacher said they never challenged the teacher. The teacher was always right. They were the professional,

they knew what they were doing. It wasn't for them to intervene. The teacher always knew what was best from the education viewpoint. My parents went to school up to the ninth grade. My mom just would never challenge anything that the teachers would ever say, even including holding me back for a year. The teachers also held my brother back for two years, which had an emotional impact on him over the long run because in order to graduate from high school, he was two years older than everybody else. And people of course assume, "You must be dumb or something." But he graduated from Hope College and he is doing very well so he is not really... but that feeling of being held back in grade school that early and even for two years you have to question why. But my parents didn't challenge it and they thought that whatever the teachers were doing was the best thing and they should just go along with it. I know a lot of parents would never stand for that kind of thing. But that is typical I think of Hispanics to leave teachers unchallenged about the decisions they make even though the decisions might not be the best. But the school is always doing it in the best interest of the child based on their opinion. But they have been known to be wrong, and they should be challenged whenever that is questionable. My parents just lived with those decisions and accepted them.

JO: Did you receive and bilingual education while you were in the Holland schools and did that lack of it...

AS: No, I never received any bilingual education, as a matter of fact my parents spoke Spanish at home to each other and they spoke English to us and we spoke English back to them. We understood Spanish fluently because of that but we could not speak

Spanish very well. As a matter of fact, every time we tried to speak Spanish, we'd get embarrassed because we just didn't have the practice and it didn't come out right. Of course the parents of other people who heard you would make fun of you. And of course in the neighborhood where we lived, we were surrounded by English speaking people so we always spoke English. My parents always spoke English to us but they spoke Spanish to each other. So we were in a home where we learned Spanish by listening to our parents but did not have a lot of practice speaking it. I did not receive any bilingual education; as a matter of fact, when I took Spanish classes because I needed to take Spanish classes in high school, I was looked at as if I just wanted to take an easy class. You see, they question me for taking Spanish in high school, like in eleventh grade or in tenth grade for that matter, but nobody questions anybody or says anything about you taking English. When you take Spanish in high school, it's not as simple as just speaking, which I had a problem with. It was difficult grammar and writing which English also had to deal with. Nobody ever questioned anybody for taking English. As a matter of fact, everybody had to take English, though when I took Spanish I was questioned, "well, this guy just wants to take an easy class." I was sitting in class and everyone would think that I knew all the answers, the teacher would even ask, she was a French major and a Spanish minor, and she was intimidated by me being in the class because whenever she would say something in Spanish she would look at me or even ask me if it was correct. I'd say, "Sure, sounds good to me." [laughter] I just kind of became an instant expert. I probably could have learned a lot more from her than I could teach her. I learned grammatical

Spanish by sound, what sounded right was what I wrote. Not because I knew the parts of speech or anything. I still couldn't tell you. I can only go by what sounds right. [laughter]

JO: So you were fluent in English when you arrived in Holland?

AS: No, well when I arrived in Holland I don't know. When I was three or four years old my parents told me that I spoke Spanish pretty well, as a three or four year old--as well as a little kid can speak. Of course, my environment in schools with nothing but English and friends speaking nothing but English, there was no opportunity to really speak Spanish except to my parents, but they didn't reinforce it because they never spoke Spanish to us. We spoke English to them, they spoke English to us. I wasn't fluent in Spanish, I was probably better at Spanish when I was younger, but as I grew up I was becoming more and more fluent in English. I never felt that I had an English speaking problem, let's put it that way.

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

AS: I grew up in the city and through the grade school system, I went to Washington School and I thought I was pretty well accepted. I always felt that I was accepted anywhere and everywhere I went. I always tried to blend in as much as possible. Not until I looked back did I realize that there are some things that happened to me that I just made excuses for, that really indicated that I wasn't as accepted as I thought. I really didn't give that much thought because the only time that I thought about that seriously was when I was in junior high. I was walking with my girlfriend, who happened to be a Mexican girl. We were walking on 9th street and this white

person was yelling obscenities at the neighbor across the street who happened to be my uncle, of course that person didn't know that. We just happened to be walking innocently by the front of the house on the sidewalk and the person started to attack us with a baseball bat. [He] started calling us some racial slurs and stuff and kept walking and telling us "spic" and "dirty" this and "dirty" that, and "if you turn around I'm going to hit you with a club and kill you," and "mother" this and "mother" that. I was really terrified. I was attacked for no reason whatsoever. I felt a lot of hate because I was being hated for no reason. As a matter of fact, the person was threatening grave bodily harm. I felt helpless because I knew that if I turned around that I would be playing into his hands and I probably would be seriously hurt, so we just kept walking and he kept walking right behind us and just kept taunting us. At that point I felt the most hate I've ever felt for anybody. I don't know if that's a natural reaction. Then I started thinking after that, it kinda woke me up from my rose colored glasses so to speak because I always saw Holland as things like that didn't happen here and I was well accepted; like everybody else, and nothing was really any different for me. That was the first time I really began looking at things more critically. As I reflected back on my life, there were a number of things that happened as a young boy in the neighborhood that I spoke to you about where we live that indicated rejection just for the fact that I was Mexican. For instance, when we wanted to play with other children, we couldn't go on their yards or go in their homes. When I wanted to join Cub Scouts, I went in to join with a neighborhood Cub Scout group with two white friends of mine and myself. We went to the first

meeting and then I was advised that my two friends could join but I couldn't because they didn't have any room. I thought "well, okay, that's a good reason, they don't have any room." But I started thinking...why, why couldn't they have room for one more person? I didn't think much about it. I thought, "Well great, they don't want me that's fine." I just thought they just didn't have room. But when I started thinking about it just didn't make any sense that my two white friends would be accepted, but not me. At that point it didn't bother me; now when I think about it bothers me.

JO: Were there any other major problems you encountered in Holland besides those two incidents?

AS: Not really. Like I say, I'm a pretty accommodating person. I try to get along with everybody. I've heard of a lot of different situations from other people. My father would tell me stories about when we first came to Holland. We lived on the north side and part of it had to do with the fact that whenever he came in to town with his buddies that they were not accepted here. He could only go to certain bars in town, that was basically understood that Mexicans could go to those bars. They were just not welcome in this community. That was in the early '50s. He tells us about that and I can appreciate what he's telling me, but I personally have never felt that way as a kid when we moved into the city from the north side. There really hasn't been a lot of things that have happened other than that one violent incident. After that I looked at things more critically. Then when I was in high school there came to be what's called the Chicano movement. It was a new phrase for Mexican Americans, more for

radical Mexican Americans. Being radical is the fact that the Chicano movement wanted to create a new awareness and consciousness in the Mexican people. For so many years, through the media and through all kinds of situations, Mexicans had been put down and also through negative stereotypes and the Chicano movement was kind of like the Black Power movement. It was "I'm proud to be Mexican American. I'm proud of who I am. And this is my identity and I am going to tell you who I am with pride. And I am going to share my culture with you." I kinda got hooked on that Chicano movement thing because being in Holland and being in mostly all white schools, or the majority all white, it's kinda like you have to forget everything you are and what you're about and be ashamed of everything and not acknowledge it in order to fit in with the regular majority culture. For some reason that leaves a certain amount of emptiness because you don't belong to that group and you know it in your heart and mind, but you also have this confusion of who you are so you're really in limbo. As a young person, I think young people need a strong identity. I think young people are always searching for an identity. They go through a phase, and I went through that phase, especially when the Chicano movement came. I just read up on everything and it just caught me like religion. So I had my own Mexican American Youth Organization. I put together a Mexican American Youth Organization and we basically had rap sessions and we talked about who we were, where we were from, what we were ashamed of and what we were proud of. Only to find out that my parents say this and treat us this way, and to find out that your parents treat you the same way and find out that we have things in common. And that

it's okay , that that's the way it's done. It's not the wrong way to do things. That's just the way you do things culturally. That's the way things are done for a lot of Mexican people, but you become so isolated in the things that you do and you're criticized for them even though they are very natural. You feel as if you are doing something wrong or not doing something right. So you are always struggling to get rid of those hang ups and try to adopt some new values or some new cultural aspects and adopt them as part of your life. I think that people who do that really miss out in terms of the real value of what they're about and who they are. There's a real emptiness because you don't belong, or you don't feel like you belong anywhere because ultimately you can try to be who you're not, but you're ultimately going to be rejected by those you are trying to be. You are never going to fit in, because it's not natural. I think this Chicano movement created a new self awareness that I kinda had to go back, like taking these Spanish classes. I had to go and learn how to speak Spanish because I didn't know. That made me feel good. I needed to read about Mexican culture about Mexico, I didn't know anything about Mexico, I'd never even went to Mexico. People naturally think that I would know something about Mexico. Well I don't know a darn thing about Mexico. I went to Mexico one year and I was culturally shocked. I was appalled with the living conditions. Things were not the same over there as they are over here. Maybe I could understand more that was going on but it's not an environment that I would naturally know about. The only environment that I know about is the environment in this country, whether it be good or bad. When people say, "Go back to Mexico," that'd be a place I'd love to visit.

People have been told that quite a bit, it's a derogatory kind of thing, like they don't belong here. I think going through this Chicano movement gave me self confidence. Then I knew who I was and from that point on I felt like I could really impact on other people as well. I felt like I had a sense of finding my roots, my cultural roots, which are very important. I think even to this day there are Hispanics in the school systems who don't have any kind of real identity or they're going further and further away from their identity. I think that impacts on their own positive self image, their own self worth and it impacts on their academic performance unconsciously.

JO: Did you feel any racial tension in Holland? Was there a civil rights movement of any sort? Did the Chicano movement march in the streets of Holland or anything like that?

AS: There was some of that but I never really felt it. I think I never wanted to believe it; I never wanted to acknowledge it. Even to the point where the person attacked me, it was probably the first time I came face to face with it. Although I was for being radical. I wasn't radical in terms of being militant; I was radical in the sense that I wanted to make people aware of who I was and what the Chicano movement was and that it was positive. And yes it was political, political in the sense that you were trying to make room in the political system and trying to get a piece of the pie and being part of the action. Not radical in the sense of what they would stereotype the Black Panthers to be in the sense that they would be violent. That wasn't anything of what I was part of, but I was part of trying to raise social consciousness of not only Hispanics themselves but non-Hispanics as well. That was part of what I was about at

the time. When there were demonstrations, and there were very few, it was all in the sense of just trying to make sure that Hispanics were equitably represented and were part of the community.

JO: Can you remember any of these demonstrations? Did you take part in any of them?

AS: We did approach the school board about counseling, having certain needs for preventing students from dropping out. It wasn't marching the streets or anything but it was a coalition of Hispanic people who got together and I was still probably in my freshman year at Hope. We were approaching the school board with a whole laundry list, seventeen points, of how to improve the education for Hispanics in the district. One of them included getting a Hispanic counselor; bilingual, bicultural teachers and a bunch of different things like bilingual education. Outside of bilingual education I think for twenty years none of the other issues were ever responded to. That is part of the process. We presented our demands but we never thought that they would not be carried out after they were agreed upon that they would be carried out. They were just kinda forgotten and put on a shelf and the issue never came up until about twenty years later, when the same issues were put on the table. But this time they did hire a bilingual counselor, they did hire a bilingual administrator. They continued to search for more people, but were still at the same point almost where we were twenty-five years ago in terms of the school district, for education. Other than that, well, there was a recall for one of the superintendents as a result of a concern of parents who felt that too many Hispanic children were being put into special education classes without proper justification. That their testing was not effective enough to measure kids that

came from different cultural backgrounds, who were expected to know other cultural aspects. Of course they're not going to know the answers. They'll know that you eat tortillas if you ask for example what is the staple of the American diet and you expect to hear bread, well they're gonna tell you tortillas and that is not acceptable and they are gonna fail. Tests are based on people's experiences in life and the Hispanic experience is different: they're not gonna come up with the right answers as far as what they're expecting to hear. I know it's more complicated than that, but it falls along those lines and it also falls along the lines in terms of vocabulary. My vocabulary is terrible in English; I'm still conscious about it. I was not raised with a tremendous vocabulary, it was very basic English, maybe it wasn't very fluent. I had to work at building it myself because I could not pick it up from my own family. My parents did not have a big vocabulary either so you basically dealt with the vocabulary that you worked with. If I was the son of a lawyer or a doctor or an engineer, I would probably have a different vocabulary, probably much broader than what I even have now. I can admit that even though I could speak English quite fluent to communicate, I was really at a deficit in terms of really being able to express myself in English adequately.

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

AS: In the past, what it offered to the Hispanic community is opportunity for employment through its agricultural industry. Primarily in the fields and then subsequently at Heinz, which is agriculturally related. They had a lot of pickles to be picked to go to

Heinz. Heinz was responsible I think in the early years for bringing a lot of Hispanics into this area and employing them in their factories, which made more permanent residents out of them. I would say employment was a primary thing that was here for Holland, an opportunity to make a decent living, better than where they came from, an opportunity for their children to go to good schools. The quality of life was different, primarily economic. I would still say that what it offers now is a lot of the same things. I think that the opportunities are even better now. I think that the values of this community are changing to be more accepting even though there is still a lot of resistance to change. In the beginning I believe that Hispanics were viewed as migrants, "they come here to do their job and primarily they'll leave, go back home. This is our community and so, they're temporary." But Hispanics are no longer temporary. There are more and more staying here and they claim this community as their's as well. They're making this their community, but there is still that mentality that Hispanics will eventually leave and it will be Holland, a Dutch community. But it's never going to be that way again. It's just going to continue to change. As industry grows they bring in more people with different values, different attitudes, different approaches and hopefully open up the community to be more accepting. I think that the community was less accepting in the early years when Hispanics were here, but they have become more and more so, trying to make room for Hispanics in this community. I think it's improving every year.

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

AS: I'm on the United Way board, which funds a number of agencies in the community.

I've been involved in at least, well between forty to fifty organizations, boards and commissions throughout my involvement since I was at Hope College all the way up until now. The list is really quite long. I can tell you what I've been involved in and what I am currently involved in: United Way, the Youth Advocacy Board and Youth Center, which is a new movement to try to get a youth center and youth activities in the community, the Migrant Resource Council, the Community Housing Resource Board, which is a monitoring group for equal housing opportunity through the Board of Realtors. I just recently resigned from Community Action House which helps the poor for emergency housing and clothing. I am involved with the Upward Bound program at Hope College as an advisory board member. I am an alumnus from that program. I have been on a number of task forces put together by the school board, some to do with cultural training of the teachers, for Hispanic cultural training of teachers, to the reorganization of the school district, the most recent one in terms of dividing the school into middle school, and changing the grades. Child and Family Services, I was on their board, it's a counseling program and it's also an adoption program; El Centro Latino, which is a Hispanic counseling program. There's a number of them. Mexican American Youth Organization, which is the one that I organized. I was part of the official membership, but not right now. I kinda hold an informal association with Latin Americans United for Progress. I was a member of La Raza Unida which was a political activist Hispanic group in Holland, but they merged with the Latin American Society to form LAUP-- Latin Americans United for Progress. I was on a number of others that I can't quite recall right now.

JO: The ones that you mentioned were the ones that you were more active in?

AS: No, there were a number more but the history goes back a long ways. I've been involved in quite a few. I even organized my own Hispanic Softball league that was comprised of ten Hispanic teams. It was primarily Hispanic, but there are a lot of intermarriages and a lot of white friends. It wasn't totally Hispanic, but it was predominately Hispanic. We played on Sunday and we asked the recreation department, "Could we reserve the fields on Sunday because they are not being used?" They said, "No, we have a policy against reserving any facilities on Sunday. It's first come first serve, if you're there you can play, if somebody else is there they have it before you." That could have caused us problems because we had an organized league and if somebody's there then it disrupts the whole schedule. But they didn't want to cooperate with us, so we said, "Okay, we'll play, we've been doing that for years, but we'll go ahead and do it even though the city doesn't sanction it. We'll go ahead and do it." It worked out all right. The only problem that we had was that one day the churches came and they were going to have a church service outside on this ball diamond where we had this tournament. They said they had this paper which stated they have the ball diamond reserved for church services. It was nearly a riot. The Police Chief showed up because the ministers called the police. It was a merging of a couple of churches, they were going to have joint services outside. The Police Chief showed up, the City Manager showed up, the Mayor showed up because they were going to intervene. I was at home, and I had to go over there and kinda mediate this whole problem. We offered the ministers to help set up if they would allow us to

finish the ball game because they were disrupting us, and if they left us alone we could finish and they could conduct their services. But no, they were swearing up a storm, believe it or not and they wanted us out of there immediately because they had reserved it. Then a lady said, "How can you reserve it because the policy of the city is that the ball diamonds cannot be reserved." But I guess just about anything can be reserved for the churches, which indeed it was. With the City Manager there and the Mayor and the Police Chief, it could have turned out to be a nasty situation. They stayed calm and cool, and everybody did so to speak. They finally allowed us to finish and we helped them set up. After that it was not a problem. The ministers wanted the people arrested and removed. The ball players were determined that they were not going to move because they had a right to be there. It got hot for awhile, but we worked it out.

JO: What year was this?

AS: That was about fifteen years ago.

JO: So about 1975?

AS: Close. I organized that Hispanic League through a board of directors. Primarily, we all had a share in it. Essentially, I pretty much kept it together. We did that for about eight years.

JO: What would you like to see change in the city?

AS: I don't know if I'd like to see anything change as much as I would like to see more economic opportunity for Hispanics. What I'd like to improve in the school system is to have the school system be more sensitive to the drop-out issue. Why are so many

Hispanics dropping out and why can't some of their programs be sensitive to the needs so that they can help prevent that? I think that has a great impact on how you survive educationally, what that's going to do to the rest of your life. Therefore I feel that has a connection to economic mobility and stability. Because I am an Equal Employment Opportunity Officer with the city, when I ask for greater opportunity for more Hispanics in the city's payroll or in other areas of industry, they also have to ask, "Well, what about your qualifications? What about your educational background?" I ask for, they don't always have these qualifications or always have this educational background, but what are you willing to do to give them an opportunity for training? Well there isn't enough. People aren't willing to do it that much for training. I do know that the Chief of Police in early years hired a few Hispanics. He did take them on to train them, which to his credit was great because they were really needed in this community. But they're not willing to do that anymore because they have an overabundance of people who are certified, that they don't have to spend any money on training. I would ask, if I could change anything here, I would like to improve the overall economic picture, or the opportunity for Hispanics in this community, and disperse them in the community so that we don't have Hispanic neighborhoods. There's nothing wrong with Hispanic neighborhoods and people think that they live together because they love each other so much. But they live together because sometimes housing opportunity exists there and usually its lower income housing. And so they gravitate to what they can afford. It shows just that most Hispanics can afford so much and that's got to do a lot with their economic

standing. It's not because they want to be necessarily there, they would prefer to live in other areas of the community, but maybe they can't afford to live there. Or maybe they're being discriminated.

[end of side A]

[start of side B]

AS: Besides improving the job opportunities and the educational opportunities, I was talking a little bit about improving the housing opportunities. I think that Holland is a real nice community and I believe that its future really will be maintained to the extent that opportunity is extended out to a lot of people including Hispanics. Through that opportunity people can live in all areas of the city and have more integration. I think we'll have a much better community if we have integration and mixture in neighborhoods than if we have segments of the community that are identified as Hispanic areas or Black areas or poor areas. I think Holland has escaped that for the most part today. I think that's the biggest challenge and biggest problem that this community is going to have in the future is how to integrate this community so that it's able to maintain a certain level of racial harmony.

JO: Is that what you see for the future of Holland and it's Hispanic community, a more of a racial harmony, more people coming together in different parts of the city living together?

AS: Yes, I would like the Hispanic community to be more part of this community, take a more active participation in the development of this community, taking ownership of the community. Not saying that it's a Hispanic community or it's a Dutch

community, but it's my community and I live here and I want to contribute to it and I want to contribute to it so it's good for my way of life but it's also good for other people who live here. I want the Hispanic community to feel like this is their community as much as anybody else's and that their contributions are worthy contributions. They should try to build this community as well, through opening businesses, through being in politics and making policy decisions that will impact the quality of life in this community, to be part of the political and decision making process that will make this community. I think up until now with Luciano Hernandez being on City Council, there has not been a lot of opportunity for Hispanics to have a lot of influence in policy direction, on the things that impact quality of life. Council definitely has that power, when they pass ordinances when they pass tax levies, when they pass programs or when they vote on special projects. Luciano Hernandez as council member can have impact on that process and being part of the Hispanic community makes sure, just by his presence, that the Hispanic community is considered in those decisions. In the past, it's very easy to forget that they are part of this community if you don't see their presence. When City Council has City Council meetings, you don't see a lot of people there anyway, unless there's a real hot issue. So Council cannot be reminded that they are also representing Hispanics in this community. But they are reminded of that everyday by Luciano's presence. So I think that is one of the greatest contributions he has made I think on behalf of the Hispanic community to Holland. There is a physical and visible presence. He's just a constant reminder that whatever decisions are made have to be sensitive to the needs

of this particular segment of the population.

JO: Thank you very much, Mr. Serrano.