Garcia, Nereida Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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Interview with
Nereida García

1993 Summer Oral History Project
Subject: The Hispanic Community in Holland, Michigan

Conducted July 12, 1993
by Andrea Peschiera
For reference now and the future, I would like you to state your full name.

My name is Nereida García.

Current address.


And date and place of birth.

My birthday is 1957, and I was born in Morón, Camagüey, Cuba. Morón was the name of the town. Camagüey was the name of the province, and Cuba is the country.

Was it an urban or a rural area?

Morón was a small town very similar to what Holland was when I started working in Holland in 1979.

Do you have any memories that you can describe for me about the town?
NG: Yes, I came when I was fourteen years old, so I remember the town very well. It was a small town with a good bus system. People got around in buses. Very few people owned cars mainly because, when I lived in Cuba, there was a communist government in the island, and you were only allowed to own a car if you belonged to the party, and that is if you had a high ranking position in the party. The cars that were around in my town were old cars, 1950s American-made cars that people had from before the Revolution.

It was very nice. I could walk in my city block. A half of the block was owned by my family, so my neighbors were my cousins. So it was very nice, nice atmosphere.

AP: And when did you arrive in the U.S.?

NG: I arrived in the U.S. in 1971. My parents actually decided to leave Cuba in the 60s, but they were not allowed to leave until 1971. We had to wait for six years from the moment they decided to leave the island to the moment the government let us go.

My father used to be a high school teacher, and he was
sent to a concentration camp and had to work in the farms, in the fields, for all those years before they let us go.

And that is not just my experience. That is the experience of every Cuban that came from 1959 on. We had to wait, and suffer a lot before they let us go. They released us.

I also worked in the fields for Fidel Castro, and his communist government. Every child after the age of twelve is sent to the farms to work. For forty-five days we had to work far away from our home, without seeing our parents, and receiving a good dosage of communist propaganda every morning before we went out to the fields.

When we arrived in the states, we were greeted by people in Miami, Florida. They had a place called La Casa de la Libertad. It’s like Freedom House. There they asked us our religion, our background. Of course, we said we were Catholic. Like most Cubans, we were Catholic. However, the Catholic church said they couldn’t help us. They sent us to the Protestant church, and my mother still persisted that she couldn’t go to a Protestant church because she had never
been to a Protestant church in her life, and didn’t know really what that was about. But the priest told my mother that God was the same in both churches, and that, at that point, the Catholic church couldn’t help any Cubans.

So, a Christian Reformed church from Grand Rapids sponsored us, and the Christian Reformed church from Holland sponsored many Cuban people, at the time also. [The church that sponsored my family] was Oakdale Christian Reformed Church. They brought us to Grand Rapids and, of course, everyone there was American and spoke no Spanish, and we could speak not a word of English. My father, however, knew how to read and write in English. He had studied in school. We communicated through notes. He couldn’t understand a word, and they couldn’t understand him because his teachers in Cuba had been Jamaicans, and the accent was completely different. So, he wrote notes back and forth.

When we arrived in Grand Rapids they had a house for us. They had rented a house for us, furnished it, and they had filled the cabinets with food, Cuban food. Imagine that
These people had taken the time to research our background. They had gone to speciality stores and they had bought our food. We were very touched. No one had ever done this for us and these were people that we didn’t know, that we couldn’t communicate with, and they were a different religion then what we were. They asked nothing in return. They said that if we would like to visit their church on Sunday, they’d be pleased, but they didn’t want anything in return. We didn’t have to belong to their church, and we just could visit. Everyday someone from that church would come to our house to check on us. They took us to the dentist. They took us to the doctors. They found my father a job. They were just wonderful, wonderful.

We were not the only ones. Most Cubans that came to Michigan, came that same way: sponsored by a church who did everything for them, and sent them on their way. This church paid rent for us for two months. They sent me to a Christian school for a year and they paid for it. They are our family, our American family in the United States. To this
day we keep in touch with them.

We did not become Christian Reformed until ten years after our arrival in the United States. We didn't want to convert into a religion simply because we were grateful. We needed to find out about that religion. We needed to study that religion. I went to Calvin College, and I did study, and I learned more about it. We liked the practicality of the church, how it helps its members. That's why, ten years after our arrival in Michigan, we finally became Christian Reformed.

AP: When you came to the U.S., how many people came with you?

NG: My parents, and myself. I have no brothers or sisters, so it was the just three of us. We would have liked my grandmother to come with us, also. She lived with us in Cuba.

However, they were only letting people that had close relatives, or relatives in the United States come. My father had a cousin in New York, and that's who sent the papers for us. And he was my father's cousin, and she was
my mother's mother, so there was no relation. However, she came five years later through Spain.

AP: Good. Before arriving to the U.S., and to Grand Rapids, what did you expect to find?

NG: When I arrived in Miami, actually, I wanted to stay in Miami, because I had a lot of friends that lived there, and Miami, Florida, is very similar to Cuba. The weather is similar. There were a lot of people there that spoke Spanish, a lot of Cubans. I felt comfortable there.

We didn't have any money, and we didn't have any close relatives, so we had to go wherever we could get help. We were offered two places: California or Michigan. When we came here in 1971 they had had earthquakes in California, and since we were leaving my grandma in Cuba, we did not want to worry her. So we said, "Okay, we'll go to Michigan, not California."

I had studied the Great Lakes in Cuba, in seventh grade, and I thought of Michigan as Lake Michigan. I didn't even know that there was a state named Michigan. But I had seen pictures of the Great Lakes, and I thought, "Oh, they're beautiful. They're
great."

I was told in Miami that it was very cold up here, and it was just a lot of snow and very cold. I had never seen snow in my life. I was fourteen years old, [and] I had never seen snow. So, I was looking forward to seeing the snow. We were given coats with hoods, winter coats, in Miami, and we arrived at the Muskegon Airport in July with our coats on. We thought, "Michigan, it's cold, so we better put our coats on." But it was cold for me. Even though it was July, it was night time, and it was cold. Now I realize how your blood gets thinner, I guess, and you don't feel it. Now I go to Florida and it's very hot. It's too hot for me after being here for twenty-some years.

AP: When you arrived what were your first impressions?

NG: We arrived at the Muskegon Airport. We were picked up by our sponsors, and they took us through downtown, downtown Grand Rapids, which is the big city. But there wasn't anyone outside, and that was a big shock to us. Because in our country, the streets are full of people, all the time.
People walking back and forth, and it’s very lively. Even though I came from a small town, the center of the town was always full of people. And there wasn’t a soul on the streets, and it just look like a ghost town. This has changed through the years. Now you go to downtown Grand Rapids, or downtown Holland, and there are people walking back and forth, and it’s different. But in 1971, when I arrived, downtown was deserted. So, a ghost town it was my first impression.

I arrived at night. So, the next day, when I got a better look at the area, I just thought it was beautiful. I loved the green lawns, the grass, and the flowers. It was just gorgeous. I really liked it. It was quite different than Cuba, because in Cuba there was nothing, when I was growing up. So we were taken to the stores and, of course, the stores were full of things and you could buy anything you wanted to buy. You didn’t have to have a ration card like we had in Cuba. You could pick between brands. In Cuba it was one of everything, like one type of soap, or
only one type of toothpaste, or only one..., and you only get what was allowed you if it was available in the store.

So, here you had the freedom of purchasing if you had a job.

Of course, at that time, we had nothing. We had no money.

We couldn’t bring anything from Cuba. We could only bring a change of clothes. That was all.

But we had a lot of dreams, and a lot of hopes. And within a year of our arrival, my father had saved enough money to buy a house and a car, and he bought a car and a house. Within three years after that he had paid the house and that car off, and had bought a bigger house, and was sending me to college and paying for it. So, America is the land of opportunity. And you can still come here without a penny in your pocket, and if you are willing to work hard and I mean hard, a full-time job and part-time job, then you can make it.

AP: Can you describe the first neighborhood you lived in, and what part of the city you lived in?

NG: I lived on Hall Street, Hall Street between Division and
Kalamazoo in Grand Rapids. It was an old neighborhood. It was close to the church that sponsored us. Our neighbors were Dutch, and they were wonderful people. They were just wonderful people. They helped us. We couldn’t understand them, but they tried to talk to us, and they were really nice. They were very good neighbors. Most of them were older people because it was an old neighborhood. There was a younger girl, a girl my age, that was my neighbor and she tried to teach me words in English, like grass, and leaves, and trees, and all that stuff, pointing to them. I remember that. It was fun. It was a good time.

It was difficult, frustrating also. Because especially at school, I was trying to get across the fact that I wasn’t stupid, that I was smart, that I just could not communicate. That is always difficult especially when you’re a teenager and you’re trying to be super good, and can’t.

AP: Can you describe for me why you came to Holland, or why you came to Grand Rapids?

NG: Yes, I came to Grand Rapids because my family, my parents,
had no one else in the United States that could help them and the Christian Reformed Church that sponsored us was in Grand Rapids.

I came to Holland when I found a job in Holland after graduating from Calvin College. I was offered a job right away teaching in the Holland Public Schools. I was given the choice between second grade or an ESL, that's English as a Second Language, position. I chose English as a Second Language because I thought that I could really help those students. I've never had an English as a Second Language teacher. I had helpers from the college. They helped me out in my first year here. And I thought if I would have had a teacher that would slow down the English lessons and talk to me, I could have learned faster. So the opportunity to do that for the newcomers arrived, and I grabbed it.

When I first was hired for Holland, I thought the majority of the people in Holland were going to be Dutch, and the school that I was going to teach at would be mainly Americans from Dutch background. However, I found out that that
wasn’t the case. Washington School, where I teach, is mostly Mexican American background, and my first year, my ESL class was mostly Asians from Cambodian, and Laotian background. Now it has gone back to being mainly Hispanics, but the first year was Asian, and it was Asian for about five or six years.

AP: Can you describe any of the memories that you had when you were in school, when you first arrived to the U.S., in high school? You were probably finishing elementary [school]?

NG: I was in eighth grade. My first year was very difficult, not the subject matter. The math class was, I guess, the easiest one. Because it was things that I had already learned in Cuba, so I could show in the math class that I was smart. That was my main thing at that time, since I was a teenager. And I just had that need to show that I was smart, and I could do that through math.

However, the other classes were frustrating. I couldn’t understand a thing. I just could not understand what was going on. I just use to take a book in Spanish,
and read while the teacher was teaching. That’s how frustrating it was. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t understand what was going on, until I was caught doing that. That was the end of it. But I was glad I was caught because then the teacher gave me things to do. Then he gave me a diagram, and I remember this was in a science class that he gave me the human body. So I had to label it and I had to look for the names of the parts to label it, and that kept me busy. That’s what I needed. I was bored.

Teachers don’t know how to deal with children that come from other countries and really need to learn, but can’t understand the language. So it was frustrating. The first year was frustrating. But within six months I understood everyone. But then the hard part came because I couldn’t tell them. I couldn’t talk. I understood everything that went on, but I couldn’t communicate. Whatever came out, it wasn’t proper English. It wasn’t right. So I didn’t want to say it. It was very frustrating.
My second year, we moved to Wyoming from Grand Rapids and I went to a public school, from a Christian school to a public school. I had a lot of friends, but the culture was very different. In Cuba, nice girls just did not date, did not go out. They also never slept over at a friend's house. That's just not done. So there were a lot of things that were different that my parents would not allow me to do. They kept me from socializing with all my new friends. I couldn't go to dances in the school because, of course, I would never go with my mother and she would never let me go alone. So that's when the cultures clashed. I was becoming more Americanized. My parents kept to their Cuban roots.

I understand that's very difficult for especially teenagers here who had parents that were born and raised in another country to really adapt to the way things are in the United States. So my parents and I had a lot of discussions about this. And now, right now, after I'm married and with children and all that, they understand that maybe they shouldn't have been so strict and all of that. But at that
time they couldn’t because their belief was so strong that this is just not done. So although I had a lot of friends in school, it was just in school, and we couldn’t go out and do things. I had a few Cuban friends from church, and so on, but the culture really kept me from socializing with my American friends.

AP: So when you arrived you did not speak any English?

NG: No, I didn’t really. I had taken a few months of English in Cuba. But somehow it really didn’t seem relevant at the time, and now I’m glad I didn’t continue with my lessons because my teacher was Jamaican also. So, I couldn’t have really understood American English. I knew the colors and I knew the numbers and I knew "How are you?" and that’s it, no more. Just about as much as American people know Spanish.

AP: Now, why did you come to the U.S.?

NG: I came with my parents. I was a child, so I didn’t really decide to come to the United States. My parents decided to come to the United States for political reasons. My father
was a teacher in a high school in Cuba, and when communism took over Cuba in the form of Fidel Castro, they started to change the curriculum in the schools. He taught history, and they changed history. They changed math. They changed everything. When they changed history, and the automobile was not invented by an American anymore but it was invented by a Russian. The assembly line was invented by a Russian. Everything was invented by Russians, and that’s when he said, "I can’t teach a lie. I cannot teach a lie. I can’t live in this place."

We were not allowed to speak our minds. There’s no freedom of expression. There’s no freedom of religion. There’s no freedom of assembly. There is no freedom, period. So you’re either with the government and into the government, or you’re nobody. If you’re quiet, you’re nobody and if you speak, you are dead or you’re in jail. So we decided to leave, and it took us awhile ’till they let us go. But we finally left.

AP: So, can you tell me about your education?
NG: I went to elementary school in Cuba up to the sixth grade and then went to seventh grade in Cuba also. In eighth grade I went to Oakdale Christian School in Grand Rapids. The rest of my junior high, high school, I went to Wyoming Park High School in Wyoming, and I went to Calvin College. I graduated from Calvin; went on to Grand Valley; obtained a masters from Grand Valley. I have twenty hours after my masters in education. I've gone to Michigan State, and Western, and a few other universities for various courses.

AP: When did you start to work at the school, Washington School?

NG: I started at Washington School in 1979. At the time I worked at Washington, Washington and Longfellow School, and I also worked Washington-Van Raalte School depending on the need of ESL students. Where ever the need was, that's where I went. It was usually part-time: mornings at Washington, afternoons at Longfellow one year, and then the following year at Washington and afternoons at Van Raalte. But then five years later, Washington School had a lot more ESL students then what they could handle, so they had me stay
there full-time, and I’ve been there ever since. It will be my sixteenth year, next year.

AP: Did you start to teach when you graduated from Calvin?

NG: Yes, right after my graduation I took a course at Grand Valley for my masters, and I met the director of the bilingual program of Holland, and she was looking for bilingual teachers so she offered me a job right away. Her name was Christina Manker. Christina had come to Holland from Indiana, and she was of Mexican American descent. She was director of the bilingual program here for many years, and went on to become the principal at Lincoln School until her retirement.

AP: Over the years, what are your impressions of the development of the school system since you’ve been teaching here?

NG: Well, I think there is a greater understanding of what ESL students are. They’re not perceived as low achievers anymore. Because an ESL student can be a very high achiever. It’s just a child that doesn’t have the language, the English language, development to show what they can do,
what they can achieve. I think there is a greater understanding of that right now.

The school is really trying very hard to hire minorities. Currently, I am an internal facilitator for strategic planning for Holland Public Schools. I think the fact that they have me, a hispanic, as part of their internal facilitator's team proves that they're trying, and they're making great strides to include the hispanic population in the school system.

We still have a long ways to go. We have twenty-two percent hispanics in Holland Public Schools, and there are only thirteen hispanic teachers. So we have a long ways to go yet, but I believe we are making strides. There is positive change. We have a new superintendent who is working very hard towards including the hispanic population and hispanic professionals in the Holland Public Schools.

AP: Are there any other organizations that you can describe that you've been a member of now or previously?

NG: I'm a member of the Board of Directors of CASA program which
is an after school program for minority students. I'm a member of the Holland Hispanic Professional Group and we meet once a month. We have breakfast, actually, together once a month, and we discuss things that are going on in Holland; how to improve things in the Holland community for hispanics; and what services are available for the community. I'm also a member of TESOL. That's Teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language, and that is a national organization. [I am also a member of NABE.] Those organizations keep me informed of what's going on nation wide for English as a Second Language students or bilingual students.

AP: What kinds of activities have you done within different organizations?

NG: Well, with the CASA program, this is my third year of teaching at the summer program for mainly hispanic students. We do have some Vietnamese students also attending our program, ESL students, but mainly hispanics. The CASA program usually teaches after school; helps the kids with homework;
and has different activities for children after school. But I’ve taught for three years now [during the summer].

During the summers we have a six week program, and this year in cooperation with the Academic Success Program which is a Kellogg Grant funded program, I was able to obtain several computers from the Holland Public Schools through Kellogg funding, and set up a keyboarding and computer literacy program for the minority students. So this year, I’m teaching keyboarding and computer literacy. Actually, [I’m] supervising the program. There are three teacher aids, and one teacher. We’re just having a great time. The kids are having a wonderful time, and acquiring some really great skills in keyboarding.

AP: Over the years that you have taught here, can you describe some of the changes you have seen in the hispanic community as it has grown?

NG: Yes, I have seen some very positive changes. When I began teaching in Holland, the hispanic community came mainly from farm workers, migrant workers that had settled the area. Of
course, these workers had children that were born in Holland and were going through the schools. Now with having had a councilman that’s a hispanic person. Which I’m proud to say is the son of one of my colleagues in Washington School - Eva Hernandez. We’re very proud of him, very proud of Luciano, and now he’s county commissioner. So that’s a great achievement. We have people in the boards, different boards, for the city. I like to see that. I like to see that involvement, and concerns of the city. Because unless we get involved, we’re not going to make any progress. We have to get involved.

AP: How do you see those changes in comparison to any changes in Grand Rapids, where you live?

NG: Grand Rapids is a bigger city, and I think there is maybe more organization. There is a program called Blueprint [?] that organizes and teaches minorities so they can become parts of boards. There is a lot of money to backup the talk of hispanics need to get involved. They also offer money for training and so on.

Here, it’s all up to us. In Holland, it’s all up to
us. It's very difficult to raise funds, to do anything.
Although I've been able to. About ten years ago when computers started to come out, I wrote a proposal to the Padnos Foundation, and they gave me a computer with money for software to help ESL children, and that was unheard of at the time. I have one of the first computers. One of the first Apple II GS, and it was purchased by a Padnos Grant. So there is money out there, if we want to look for it, but we really need to try hard.

In Grand Rapids I think there is more money, more organization, maybe more communication. The hispanics know where to go to get things. There's more literature out in Spanish so that they understand. The hispanics in Grand Rapids understand where the agencies are at, the job agencies and so on. So, it's easier.

AP: Is there anything else that you'd like to add about Holland's response to the hispanic community?

NG: I would like to see more change and more openness in the Holland community in response to the hispanic community. I
really appreciated the welcome the church gave us as Cubans, and I think the same approach should be taken to the Mexican-American community in Holland. There are a lot of people that need help. A lot of migrants that are settling in the area, and if the church would take them under their wings, and do the same thing they did for us in Grand Rapids: sponsor a family, help them out. I think that would go a long ways.

In Grand Rapids and in Holland, the Christian Reformed churches were wonderful to us as Cubans, wonderful. I never saw any prejudice. I never had any bad feelings towards them. They never showed any bad feelings toward us. I think if that’s done in Holland, it can go a long ways with the Mexican-American community.

I think they resent the fact that the churches have sponsored Asians, and they have helped them out, and yet they are here or other Mexican-American people come here, and have to live in a mission because there’s no one to help. But there is a way of getting around them. There are
a lot of Mexican-American people here now that can help other people. That can be done. But I think if the Dutch churches get involved and pay them the same type of attention they paid us as Cuban, I think that can go a long ways.

AP: What have been some of the major challenges you have encountered in Holland?

NG: One thing that has always bothered me in Holland is that someone sees my name, García... - Even in the schools, they see my name, García, and right away they assume I’m a teacher’s aid just because I’m hispanic. That is a challenge. It’s a challenge to try to keep my cool, and to try to say to myself, "Well, they’re the ones that don’t understand."

I think people here have stereotyped the hispanics, and put them all in the migrant worker category, and they do not realize that hispanics are many. There are twenty-two countries in which Spanish is spoken. They don’t realize that there are a lot of professional hispanics and just
because your name happened to be Garcia doesn't mean you have to be a helper, but you can also be a professional.

So it has always bothered me that when I go to a school the secretary always assumes I’m a teacher aid, or whoever walks in the school. The substitute teacher [always assumed the same]. And I don’t dress any different than any of the other teachers, and it’s just that assumption right away, a stereotype. It’s a challenge. I guess, as hispanics, as hispanic professionals we have to prove to other people. I guess, we have to be better just to prove that we’re good enough.

AP: How about describing some of the challenges you encountered in Grand Rapids? - something that’s very vivid, something you can remember.

NG: I think that the main challenge for me was learning English when I came to the United States. That was challenging. It was very difficult, too, at first. I was already fourteen years old, and aware of making mistakes when I talked, and not wanting to make any. It was difficult. That was the most difficult challenge.
Of course, I just wanted to work right away. I didn’t want to go on to college, and I just wanted to get a job. As soon as I was old enough to get a job, I wanted to get a job, and get out of school. But my father told me, "No way, you are going to school," and, so, I went. During my second year of college, I decided to get a job, a summer job in a factory. I worked at General Motors for a month. That’s all I could take. That really made me decide to go back to school. That was very difficult. Working at GM was very difficult. That was a challenge, too, as well.

But, I guess, the biggest challenge was learning the English language, learning the culture, the American culture. It was similar to mine but yet, in a lot of subtle ways, very different, and with a set of parents that wouldn’t let me have become Americanized that easy. It was difficult.

(Continuation of the interview - side B)
AP: What do you feel the hispanic community has to offer to Holland?

NG: I think the hispanic community has a lot to offer to Holland. The hispanic community in Holland is rich in tradition, and it's varied. There are Chileans, and there are Mexican-Americans. There are Puerto Rican-Americans. There are Cubans, and there a lot of people from different backgrounds in Holland. So it's a community rich in tradition, and also it's a big community. It's a growing community. [The hispanic community] had several young hispanics graduated from college, recently.

We have LAUP [Latin Americans United for Progress] Fiesta every year, and I hope that it gets to be like the Tulip Time Fiesta, and takes up like that. I hope everyone participates in that, just like the hispanics participate in Dutch dancing and the parades. I have my own Dutch outfit which I bought even before I ever had a Cuban outfit, and it's a lot of fun. It's a lot of fun to share in each others traditions and in each others culture. You learn about other countries, other ways of lives, that way. So I think that
the hispanic community in Holland has a lot to share and I just hope that they do, and that the Dutch community, the Anglo-American community, opens up to that, to the sharing, and participates in the fiestas that the hispanic community has.

AP: Are there any particular changes you would like to see in the city of Holland? I know you spoke about that a little already.

NG: Yes, I'd like to see more openness on both sides, on the hispanics and on the anglo community side. I think a lot of that is occurring already. I'd like to see more patience. I'd like to see the hispanic professionals given a chance to prove themselves.

Sometimes when a hispanic person interviews for a job, that person is not going to interview well because of a lot of cultural traits. I think there should be hispanic people in the interviewing committees. Now, I'm thinking specifically about the schools. When hiring teachers, not only should you have Anglo-American teachers in your
interviewing panel but I also believe you should have
hispanic teachers in your interviewing panel. I like them
to take into consideration that maybe those hispanics
interviewing for those positions did not speak English
themselves for the first seven years of their lives. I like
for them to think that they come from a different culture
and that they have a lot to offer to the students, not just
as role models but [keepers of] a rich heritage.

We need a lot of hispanic role models in Holland. We
have a huge dropout rate and that needs to change, and I
think if we have more hispanic teachers in the schools that
will change. I’d like to see that change being made.

I also like to see the hispanic community more
accepting of the Anglo community, not as critical but more
accepting of that community. And I like them to think that
they can do it, because I know that they can. I like for
each hispanic student to know that they are capable of
achieving their goal, and just because they are hispanics
not to have that as an excuse. That shouldn’t be an excuse.
AP: Can you describe what you see in the future for Holland and its community? That’s a hard one.

NG: I like to see Holland as an integrated community, working side by side. I’m happy with some of the progress already, as I mentioned, with some of the boards of the city with hispanics serving on the boards. I like to see more of that. I like to see neighbors helping neighbors no matter what background. I think there’s a lot of that going on right now, and I’d like to continue seeing that.

AP: Are there any traditions that you celebrate in your family, and in this community, in the Holland community, that you can share?

NG: Yes, we celebrate what we call Noche Buena. That’s Christmas Eve, Noche Buena for Cubans. It’s a celebration of roast pork. Usually, in Cuba what we had was the whole family got together, and we use to dig a big whole in our backyard, and put coals in it, and roast a whole pig over it. We had arroz con gris which is rice and beans cooked together, black beans cooked together with a lot of spices,
and roast pork, and salads, and special sweets imported from Spain, called turrones.

Of course, we’re now in Michigan, in Holland.

[Laughing.] We are buried by snow, and we can’t have that. So, we usually just have some pork, roast pork, and we still have our arroz con gris, our black beans and rice, and salads, and we are able to buy the turrones from Java Mart.

[In an animated tone of voice.] Which is really - you know - this talks about the different cultures of Holland. Java Mart is owned by an Indonesian family who goes and gets their turrones from Chicago. So it’s really a mixture of cultures in Holland.

AP: Have you seen some of the traditions changing over the years?

NG: Well, I see that, and I see that with my children. Of course, my children were born in the United States. I have two boys that were born in the United States, and they are Americans. They’re Cubans only because their father and I are Cuban, and we try to teach them the language with not a
whole lot of success sometimes. We try to teach them the
culture, but I'm afraid we can't keep it alive, all of it.

I know the culture, one tradition, that I grew up with
that they don't have at all is el Día de los Reyes Magos,
the Day of the Three Wise Kings, which is January six.
We celebrated in Cuba. That's when we get our presents,
not Christmas time, and we use to get our presents by our bed.
Right next to our shoes, we got our toys on January six.

[Laughing.] And of course, my children know nothing about that
because they expect their toys at Christmas. [Laughing.] They're
not about to wait until January six for that. So, that's a
tradition that has gone. My generation was the last one.

AP: How do you perceive the religious development of other
hispanics from the time they've arrived in the U.S.? You
spoke a little bit about your development, quite a bit
actually. Are there any parallels with other hispanics?

NG: The religious development.

AP: Yes.

NG: I know that the religious development of probably ninety-
nine percent of the Cubans was like mine, my background. Most of them were Catholics sponsored by Christian Reformed Church. Maybe about half of them stayed in Michigan, and joined the church, and the other half moved to Miami, and went back to being Catholic. The other hispanics that were not sponsored by churches, kept their religion with different degrees of church attendance, and so on.

I think, I perceive - This is my perceptions, doesn’t mean it’s reality. - But I think Mexican-Americans are very religious. I’ve been invited to several quinceañeras, which are fifteenth birthday parties, and I know they always go to the Catholic Church before the big party and all of that, and that is a cultural thing for Mexicans which is not the same and was never the same for Cubans, but I know that they are very religious.

Puerto Rican-Americans, I think, are different. They are not all Catholics. I see them, some, as being Pentecostals. So they’re different. They have different religions within the Puerto Ricans. The Chileans, that live here in Holland,
are also - some are Catholics and some are Pentecostals.

So, actually, it’s not fair to think of hispanics as Catholics all. That’s also a stereotype, I believe. There are a lot of hispanics that are Protestant in Holland. There is a big population of hispanics that are Protestant.

AP: Do you feel that the family, and the extended family is a very important part of the lives of hispanics?

NG: Yes, I believe extended families, the family unit, is very important in hispanic lives. At the present moment, my mother is taking care of my grandmother. My grandmother is very old and if she were to be a member of an Anglo-American family, she would have been in a rest home a long time ago because she has lost her speech. She has lost, I think, I believe, her mind. She can’t walk. She would have been in a rest home. But my mother takes care of her like a baby, and she’s not about to put her in a rest home, and she will never put her in a rest home. And she’s there taking care of her all the time. That, I don’t think, would ever happen in an Anglo home, or American home.
Hispanics have a high sense of responsibility towards their elders, and towards their extended family. My parents paid for my college education, and I take care of my parents and I will take care of my parents in the future - not only my parents, but my uncle, and my cousins. We're a very united family.

AP: Do many of your relatives live close to you now?

NG: Yes. I live about four blocks away from my parents and, like I said, my grandmother lives with my parents. My only uncle in Michigan lives at the end of my block, and I have another uncle in the United States who lives in Miami - who we call, and go visit, every two years. Unfortunately, the rest of my family is in Cuba and I have not seen them for twenty-two years, but we do write to each other and share in their pain.

AP: You said that you have two sons.

NG: Yes. Would you like me to tell you a little bit about them?

AP: [Quietly.] Sure.

NG: Okay. Eddie - his name is Eduardo Carlos. We call him
Eddie. He’s eleven. He will be twelve in August. He’s an all-American kid: baseball player; doing fine in school, honor role; and he’s all-American from Michigan. He speaks Spanish, however. He understands everything. [Laughing.] His speech could use a little help, but he can understand and be understood by everyone.

The youngest one is Christopher, and Chris is nine years old. He’s fine, doing fine in school, too. He is your all-American kid. He cannot speak Spanish. He understands everything, and he will try to speak somethings, and he’ll say, "Pero" then he stops. And I think if he felt the need to speak Spanish he could, but right now he’s not talking much.

AP: What are your hopes for your children?

NG: My children will go to college, and they will become professionals. At this point, they both want to be baseball players, of course. [Laughing.] But we keep telling them that they have to have a career even if they’re baseball players. So it is my hope and, at this point, we are
setting their minds on higher education. Without education, there is not much of a future here. Everyone needs to have an education, and high school will just not cut it anymore. You need to have higher education. So, they know that they are both going to college.

AP: Can you tell me a little bit about your husband?

NG: I met my husband in Grand Rapids. He happens to be from Camagüey. As you remember, Camagüey is the province where I was born. And I didn’t know his family, or my family didn’t know his family in Cuba, and we met in Grand Rapids. We met at a wedding of some Cuban friends of ours.

My husband didn’t go to college right after school. He chose to go to a technical school, and become an electrician. But, about three years ago, he decided that he wanted to be a teacher. He had started volunteering at the school where my children attend, and he was vice-president of the PTO. He started going into the classrooms, and helping out, and he thought that he would like to be a teacher, and he quit his
job. He had a job as a manager of a R.V. store, and quit his job, and started college. So he has two more years to go, and he’ll be a high school science teacher.

AP: Would you like to describe something about your life, or anything, that you would like to share with generations to come?

NG: I believe that everyone must have a dream, and a goal in life. They should not be limited by circumstances. When I came to this country, my family had nothing, nothing at all. It would have been a lot easier for them to say, "Okay, you can work," when I wanted to work, and [for them] not [to] sacrifice and send me to college. But my parents were strong believers in education, and I am also.

And I think the future generation needs to be educated. I believe education is the answer. No one can take an education away from you. No one can take knowledge away from you. You can lose your property. You can lose all your possessions, just like Cubans did when they left their country. But no one can take your education from you, and
with the knowledge that you have you can build on. And even if you don’t know the language of the country that you immigrate into, you have the skills. You have the skills, the organizational skills, and the learning skills necessary to build a life, and a future. So for the generations ahead, I believe education is the key to your future. Of course, you also have to have faith and trust in God.

(End of the interview)