12-12-1997

Mascarro, Rene-Clara Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Larry Wagenaar

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/ses_holland
Part of the Archival Science Commons, and the Oral History Commons

Recommended Citation


Oral History Interview with
Rene and Clara Mascarro

(unedited)

Conducted December 12, 1997
by Larry Wagenaar

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
Interview with Rene and Clara Mascorro
December 12, 1997
Interviewer: Larry Wagenaar

LW: Can I call you Rene and Clara, is that okay?

RM: My name is actually Rene. My dad always pronounced it "Rene."

LW: Okay. Could you state your full name?

RM: Rene Mascorro. I was born in Lula, Mississippi, in 1955. [date removed].

CM: My name is Clara Milagros Aquino Mascorro.

LW: Tell me a little bit about where you grew up, Rene.

RM: Well initially I was over on 104th, just west of Zeeland. My dad worked for a nursery called Blankenstein's, which eventually became Old Dutch Gardens, belonged to Donald Pyle. We used to live in converted chicken coops there. We lived there until 1962 or '63. I went to New Gronigen School, and we used to walk to school—that was kind of a drag, having to walk. We moved eventually, they knocked those buildings all down. There were probably five or six buildings and they had various other people living there, but since my dad worked for Blankenstein, he apparently owned the property. They had all kinds of dahlias, they had pictures of dahlias up when I was little out there in the fields. Beautiful. From there we moved just up the road to 112th and Riley. So that was actually about a country mile. Out there was all corn fields, we actually lived in Donald Pyle's house, I guess it was his grandmother's or something, big two-story old farmhouse. It was quite an experience living in it because it was so old, floors creaking. It was one of those kind of houses where the
farmers would have their sons and daughters still living with them, so there was two
or three entrances into the house, so it was a complete house upstairs. There were
toilet facilities, which didn't work when we moved in there. It was just a shambles.
When we hit that house, my brother and I were forced march by my father to go
check it out, to clean up. You could have used a loader, there was so much trash in
that house. I couldn't believe it, we were sent there to do that. I was crying, "Look,
we've got to clean all this up." I had no idea where to start. So we moved there.
We got to know the neighbors there. Elmer Helder and Roy Alofs--he used to own a
junkyard and Elmer was a farmer. Very pleasant people. They came to the house
once we settled in. I remember his wife bringing us a pumpkin pie and talking about
the previous family that had been there. It's pretty interesting. And by the looks of
the way they left the house, they were quite a family.

LW: When did you move to Holland? You were born in Mississippi.

RM: I think we came up here...we weren't one of the initial first families, but we're pretty
early. Now this is a guess--probably like 1957 I arrived here, just as a baby. My dad
happened to find work at Blackenstein's. As with life, where you earned the money is
where you stopped. They owned a truck but they hauled people. They would follow
the crops, in fact my dad was picking cotton, that's why he was in Mississippi. And
that's why I was born there. He was the driver because our family owned the truck.
I've got a picture of that too. Neat old '50-something truck. Pretty neat. That's how
we ended up just being in Zeeland--actually living just outside there. We came to be
here, and we started going to school at North Holland.
LW: Clara, tell me about your growing up years and how you ended up here.

CM: I was born in Jarabacoa which is a little town by the mountains in Dominican Republic. I'm the fourth of five children. I grew up in a very, I would say nice family structure. My parents, they were hard workers. My father went to medical school, and he became a doctor about five years before I was born. I have good memories while I was growing up.

LW: Your mother was in the home?

CM: My mother was home only on a part-time basis because we used to own a pharmacy. My mother went to the pharmacy every day. So we grew up between my mother and a caregiver, which was a person that we saw as a grandma. I never met my grandmother. She took care of us. When I was ten years old, we moved to another town called __________, closer to the capital. I went to the middle school and high school there. When I finished high school, I went to the capital and I attended a medical school there.

LW: Did you complete that program?

CM: I did. I became a medical doctor, meanwhile, I came here to the U.S. and that's when I met my husband.

LW: What led you to come to the United States at that time?

CM: At that time, I was having some problems with my health. So I came to U.S., and on that occasion, my doctor's secretary, she brought me to Holland just to visit. And that's when I met Rene.

LW: So you were coming to Grand Rapids or some similar location and then just visited
Holland and liked it? Or was it Rene’s….

CM: Well, I met Rene and we became friends. I returned to the Dominican Republic because I was working there as a physician. Three years later we decided to get married.

LW: The rest is history, right?

CM: We’ve been married for eight years.

LW: Tell me about your first impressions of Holland, especially on that first visit when you came, starting there.

CM: When I came at that time, I only came like one night to Holland. But it was so different and so unique for me to see how different, even being in the United States, all of this like housing, like this Holland structure of the houses. I didn’t know that in Holland, could be a strong Dutch heritage of the area. After awhile when I moved here, I started gaining more flavor of the Holland area. I was shocked to see how conservative the community was. Although I came from a conservative family, because my parents, they have high expectations and values. Although it was different.

LW: How was it different than the conservatism of your youth? Can you conceptualize that?

CM: For instance, where I’m coming from, you can go to church as you please. But I noticed here, like the first question that people asked me rather than ask me, "Are you comfortable right now?" one of the first questions that they asked me was, "What church do you go to?" That was a shock for me because I wasn’t expecting that. So
I realized that the community was very church-oriented. Where I'm coming from, even to what tied to the church, we have more freedom.

LW: We'll come back to some of those issues down the road.

(Question jumbled....tape fades)

RM: Like I said, the housing we had was actually converted chicken coups, I remember there were four of them all together, lined up on 104th. They're of course all gone now. We only lived there for a short time as I remember. I remember one time my brother wanted to cook and he left the gas on--we had LP gas. My mom and dad about skinned my brother. Came home, there was gas...Lucky we didn't blow the place up. I remember one time I fell into a cultivator at one time on a tractor. I still have scars all over. I came home pretty bloody from that. My mom was in a rush. From there, we had some neighbors called the Allens--they were real nice. They worked at Mead Johnson in Zeeland. He was a real nice person; the whole family was real nice to us. We moved up to 112th and Riley in 1963, I think it was. We attended the old North Holland school there before they knocked down the big red brick building. We were one of the first Hispanic families out there I guess; there was nobody else out there. Noordeloos Christian Reformed Church was just down the road from us. Everyone had to drive down our road to get there for a lot of people. You have a lot of people driving by all dressed up in their suits and ties, and we're out there playing baseball Sunday morning, there were six of us--actually five at that time. My sister Laura hadn't been born yet. They would come by in their nice cars, and we're talking a lot of farmers out there. So I called them bone honkers. Their
neck would be like an owl, turn and watching us and wondering, "Why aren't these children in church?" Eventually they stopped and talked to my father. My father having worked all week outside, he was kind of a foreman out in the field around the tractors and collecting people, he thought, "Well, gee, get rid of the kids on Sunday morning from 9 until at least 11? Yeah, sounds good to me." (laughs)

LW: So you started going to the Noordelos church...

RM: After awhile, we quit going there come fall time, well in the summertime there was school—we always went to school, my dad made sure we went to school—come the summer, early spring, we started collecting chrysanthemums and asters and stuff from Walters Gardens, because we were actually a wholesaler to Walters. We supplied to them; they're still in business. We also picked blueberries. We had time for that. We also had to split wood, so Saturday morning, you better get your cartoons in early, because when Dad woke up it was time to go out and cut some wood. He used to borrow an old international truck from where he worked. We'd go cut wood Saturday mornings, force march, it wasn't a matter if you wanna, you're gonna. Come fall, as we got older, it was picking apples out in Ganges. We also attended church in North Holland for awhile. A young lady named Margo Yonker, I guess she's a coach now for some college. She got to know my brother Juan. She would stop by, and she started taking us to church. I don't know what happened there, we only went one or two times, and I think we just didn't fit in there, because it was a very short...we didn't go any more. I think we only went twice. It was really nice too. You get to sit there and listen to Jesus, and about Jesus, and all of these neat
books. They always gave us little toys. I really got off on that. It was short.

LW: Did you feel the same way at Noordelos during the time you went there?

RM: At Noordelos we were actually more involved with all of our neighbors there. The Alofs and the Helders, those are the two people I remember the most there. It was nice seeing their kids—I went to school with their daughters and stuff. That was kind of neat. Also there was a cadet there. I think that's what they call them—Calvinist Cadet at Noordeloos. That was kind of neat, but the man who used to run that ward, I don't know what his last name was, he was a single man. Apparently he got to the point where it was too much for him. For one summer we played baseball, I've got to admit that was one of the funnest times though. We went on a camping trip to some lake, and there was always, to this day, that was probably one of the things that affected me the most. They were always real nice to us. Other than that, my brothers Juan and Ernie were more the socialites and they'd play baseball. They hung out there. Me, I always liked to be out in the barn building things, out in the wood behind the house at the pond, I should say the river. They actually built the pond eventually for irrigation. I was always not so much friends with those because of the athletic part of it. They enjoyed that. We got all through, it was enjoyable. The people were nice. Living next to the junkyard, my neighbor Roy would come over with some big B.S.A. or engine. Those things weigh about two million pounds, but just hearing them come in. He played baseball; he was quite a bit older than us. I remember him coming over. The most biggest person, the Havermans, bringing hay in there. He'd allow us at least to hang around a little bit because we were too little
to help lift these great big things. He also had cattle in there, and dairy cattle, so he had to tend those every day. Clarence Littlejohn, Wilma, Eunice, they had such unusual Bible names. Really nice people. That's pretty much what I remember, just hanging around the woods and running around or at the lot. Carl Petroelje was where we picked blueberries. Eventually, when we got old enough to stay out there--of course I was out there since I was diapers--we stayed out there with the rest of the migrants, they'd start driving everyday. People from Arkansas, Kentucky...

LW: Was there a difference between you as a year-round resident and the migrants who came in and out? As far as, there was no division there or they didn't look at you differently or you look at them differently? One sort of happy family--maybe happy is the wrong word, but, as a colloquism, I was trying to say it. I mean, there was collegiality, or you knew each other well?

RM: At Petroeljes, a lot of times, the same people would come in year after year after year. We started going there probably 1967 or '68, and I think 1972 was the last year we quit staying there. I graduated in '73. Some of the people from Arkansas, the Haneys, they came year 'round. The Mulders were kind of like us. They actually lived in Grand Haven, but their family would actually come and stay like we did. It saved a lot of time for us travelling. My dad would come home and...On Saturdays if he could he would stay and pick blueberries with us. There was a lot of fun there. The kids, we never really had any fights or name calling. I've seen other families have fights among themselves. Husbands and daughters, some of those people, they drank too much. I saw some pretty good brawls with husbands and wives. They
were going for it. That was about the only problem we saw there. Carl used to have quite a lot of families of blacks coming to work there, but there were some technical difficulties that I was involved with. I was four or five years old, for me it's just a memory, from Del Petroelje, we were out messing around. These trucks, you'd see the food that these people had brought in. We'd start eating their food, well, geez, it hit the fan. They came to eat their lunch and someone had been going through it, us kids. And that was very bad. They were very upset, of course I can imagine, had someone gone through my lunch that I had packed, and just ate parts and put the rest back. That's one of the few memories that was a bad one. That's about the only problem that I was actually involved with there. Other times it was work every day. I used to work in the field next to my father. Carl would allow us to do that, because we had other pickers. My mom and my sisters, they were good workers.

LW: Clara, I'm trying to break him up chronologically to where you are. I'm going to ask him a number of questions, because of his experiences here in town. You were one of the early Hispanic families in the area, especially out where you were. Tell me what it was like--I'm thinking generally in the community at large--what was it like to be a Hispanic in Holland or Holland area at that time. I'm thinking now about maybe discrimination issues you have run into or your parents may have run into. Things like that.

RM: For me, as far as that point goes, when I started going to North Holland school, Rene, my teacher changed my name to Ron. She thought I'd fit in better. So I was known as Ron. From third grade on up through high school, I was known as Ron. She just
thought I'd fit in better. We were the only family there of Mexican people in North Holland. It was kind of weird. I had a real hard time there. I didn't like to go out and meet people and stuff, especially when we were kids. That was one of the things I remember. As far as things happening to us, people were very kind, strangers were very kind to us. My dad always told me about a woman named Eleanor Baker. I eventually ended up working with her at Meijers. At one point my dad had brought, well, he had five kids at the hospital, she actually helped my father out there. He always told me, "That Eleanor Baker, if it wasn't for her, we wouldn't have had medical help here. I never experienced too much like that with my father. Of course, my father is pretty humble. If you stepped on my dad, he'd kind of look like "Okay, I'm not going to force the situation. Someone else is going to help me." So we never had observed much of that. The only thing I actually witnessed one time was on our trip down in Texas. We stopped in a coffee shop, in like Little Rock, someplace in Arkansas. My dad just wanted a thermos of coffee. Just a regular, you know, that much coffee. We almost had to wait for three or four people, standing there and standing there. I looked at my dad like, "Hey, we gotta go--everyone is outside waiting." Then he charged us two dollars. This is like 1967, '60s...

LW: Two dollars for a thermos cost a lot of money in that period!

RM: That's big bucks. My dad was kind of upset about that. Other than that, sometimes you have things said to you, you don't even, when you're a kid you have no idea what was that all about. That guy was mad about something. My dad was always like, "Ah, don't worry." My mom too. My mom was a real strong person, but she
wasn't bilingual. She could defend herself in her later years, but when she was younger, she was taking care of five kids. Doing all of the cooking, the sewing, and trying to take care of the house. The house, you'd see the curtains move in the wintertime. It was terrible.

LW: Drafty. What about at the school, you mentioned you were isolated at the school?

RM: Well, we were the only family there, so I really didn't have anyone to turn to. I can't remember there were any good friends. Wayne Sheersma. That was in high school, and wrestling stuff. We were always treated well. Mrs. Hemple, in fact I saw Mrs. Hemple not too long ago. She was one of our teachers in fifth grade. During that part that we went from North Holland for a year, then we went to Waverly on 120th. I don't know what kind of building it is now, but there used to be a school there. I went there for one year, I think, while they were knocking down North Holland school and building the new one. Then we went back to North Holland school--then I was in sixth grade already. But as far as school goes, my fifth grade teacher Mr. John Maat, he did try to make a point of getting me involved in school. I was in charge of the light switch. When the overhead came on, that was my job to get up and turn the light switch off. I remember one time they had installed another light switch to his desk. So that was his big game with me. I'd turn it off, and he'd turn it on. But we never had much experience anything like that. Even picking the apples for John Linn. Nice person. He had a ton of daughters and sons. I think all of those guys had motorcycles. That was half the excitement of going off to pick apples, just to see the big bikes coming through the orchards. No, I never experienced a whole
lot as a young person, that I was aware of. I remember going to Zeeland, doing the laundry next to the Van Raalte Restaurant. That was one of the memory I have of Zeeland. I spoke some English when I was younger. That’s when they had the braceros. The United States actually had card…

CM: (unintelligible)

RM: It was in English.

CM: It was in 1960, right?

LW: It’s a card of some kind?

RM: Yes, they had permission to come work in that state. And most of these men would leave their family. You know they were going back to their family. You get all these single men. They’d come into Zeeland, and that is when they had a pool hall in Zeeland yet. You don’t see that much anymore. There was also a huge man who used to live in Zeeland--like a seven footer. I used to go help interpret for these people. They’d go in and want to buy boots and stuff in all of the stores. That was kind of nice.

LW: Did you tend to be an interpreter for your parents too then?

RM: All of us were. When we went to town, it wasn’t a matter just for company, it was like, standing in line and tell them what you said. We all did what we could. I’ve got to admit, it was good for me to be segregated from my brothers and sisters in school, because I learned. I was forced to learn. I think that really helped me with my English quite a bit. Even though I’m not poor, I learned from the kids. The teachers I think realized that I was having a hard time. But they made me try to be
part of it, had my heels dug in sometimes where you just don't want to. I wanted to be like everybody else.

LW: Did your parents learn English as time went on?

RM: Yes, my dad started attending community schools here. I used to go in with him at night and look at all of the books. My mother, she could understand it, but...

LW: Didn't speak it.

RM: Yes. If she had to. If she was in line by herself in K-Mart or Shoppers Fare when it was open, she could speak English. Broken as it might be.

LW: Well, the Dutch were the same way a hundred years ago, a hundred fifty years ago. So the experiences are very similar as you look at immigrant communities settling, and then second generation, and so on. I wanted to ask you, Clara, have you maintained your medical practice? I know you now work for Child and Family Services. Was that transferrable when you came to the United States, your education? Or did you choose to go into a different field, or...?

CM: No. My education was transferrable and the only thing that I have to do is like, taking a test here. I have taken the test twice. I haven't taken for probably five years. I've been in Holland eight years. So I took that the first year and then two years later. One of my main problems at the time was the white people language, language barrier, because the test was given, it was like a timing test. I had seen barriers in the educational field, because I applied to different universities in order for me to continue, maybe taking a refreshing course. Like for instance, I applied to
Grand Valley State University and Western University, and they had told me that even though I am overqualified, they have other people who has been chosen for continuing education. Really, I fell into Child and Family Services. It was by chance because I decided to stop for a little while, what I was doing, and because my position in Child and Family Services is prevention. And the medicine field is mostly prevention, rather than do intervention. That would be the ideal thing. So to me, was a way to be able to apply my knowledge and my experience, working in the substance abuse field in Child and Family Services.

LW: Did you start with Child and Family Services shortly after coming here, eight years ago?

CM: No. My first job was in the migrant health clinic, which is now called Intercare. It was a great opportunity for me because when I came from my medical field, I was able to help the migrant population at that time. Working with the doctor, like assisting the doctor in different procedures. I was working there seasonal. I was laid off, and I decided to study. So like for a year and a half I attended like a self, there was like a course in Grand Rapids where they prepare foreign doctors. It was called the Kaplan, to continue with my education.

LW: What kinds of issues did you see as you worked in that migrant health clinic? What kind of things did you see? What were the issues facing these people?

CM: Language barrier. Something that really concerned me in the migrant population was that many women were not allowed to go and see a male doctor for a gynecological exam. I know that when women have pap smears done, it is really preventive for
cervical cancer. That was a concern for me. Other issue was the delay of treatment. Sometimes I saw a lot of people that, when they attended the clinic to see a doctor, things were so far, that they should have been there earlier. Transportation was another issue.

LW: Just being able to get to the clinic.

CM: Yes. People were not able to get to the clinic. That was really sad for me to see that.

LW: Because of your medical training and being a doctor, were you able to do some of those tests for these individuals who came in, or you were not allowed to because you weren't licensed in the states?

CM: No, I wasn't allowed. It was really frustrating for me because having the knowledge, and the ability to do those things, I felt like in handcuffs, like, tied up. But in a way, I felt that at the same time I was helping them, because I was able to translate the physician exactly how they felt. One of the things, as a female, they trust me. As a Hispanic, they trust me. So I built like a bridge, and I was a connection.

LW: In the migrant health clinic, were most of the people who worked there Anglo, or were they mostly Hispanic, or a blend?

CM: It was a blend population there. But at that time, there were only two Hispanic people with a lot of knowledge in the medical field as far as like helpers, which was myself, and another medical doctor from my country, the Dominican Republic, who was working there at that time. She was doing the assessment when the patients came, and I was with the doctor assisting. Sometimes I work at the pharmacy stocking medication, because while I grew up, before attending medical school, I used to help
my parents in the pharmacy.

LW: That was going to be my question, did you work in the pharmacy?

CM: Yes, I did. It was pretty funny because while I grew up, I'd start playing with a stethoscope before working with dolls, because of my father being a physician. I feel really proud that I was the only one who was born at home. I was delivered by my father at that time, in my house. Because we all have to work in the family, I remember while I was attending my high school, my mother decided to send me to the high school from two to six, because that way I was able to help her during the morning time. I used to work in a pharmacy on the weekends, Saturdays and Sundays, in order for me to maybe have some money to go to the movies.

LW: Was there any barrier as a female going into the medical professional in the Dominican Republic? Did you run into any barriers?

CM: There is always barriers. Especially because of the submissive and humble position that sometimes women play in our society, but I think that I found more barrier here, in order to continue my studies, maybe taking classes as refresher in my courses, rather than in my country.

LW: Tell me a little bit about the barriers you ran into when you came here. You mentioned trying to apply for school.

CM: In the basic and educational field, I thought that I was very qualified because of my background. Previously I sent my paper to transcription place in Chicago, where they evaluate your credits and everything. They sent me a letter--they were saying that my credits in all of my studies comply with the same, or what would equal, to the U.S.
RM: A verification.

CM: The certification, and I'm licensed in the Dominican Republic.

LW: So it's simply that board exam.

CM: That board exam. But I thought I may be taking some courses, or maybe applying to the P.A. program in the university here because I haven't really touched a patient in eight years. And medicine is a learning and changing, even though I keep updated in reading, and I go to the Holland library. I look for books. It still is different because you need that contact with the patient. To me, it's been really frustrating.

LW: Yes, I can understand that. Tell me what led you to Child and Family Services?

CM: Previously I was working in the public school system. I was working for West Ottawa.

LW: What were you doing for them?

CM: When I was working in the migrant health clinic, and I saw all of these issues with the migrant community, I thought that we should do something. We should help our youth and address certain issues. Maybe one of the ways would be starting with the children and helping the parents to become better educated. I discussed that with Father Ted Kozloski and also at that time, Father Steve Dudek here in Holland from St. Francis de Sales. Through the Catholic Diocese, we applied for a grant to the Kellogg Foundation. They gave us money for two years to run a grant with the Hispanic community. I organized a tutorial program for those kids after school in the West Ottawa school district and they were matched with high school students from
West Ottawa to help the middle school. That was done three days a week. At the same time, I met with the parents once a week to educate them in different issues: domestic violence, substance abuse, self-esteem, how to be more assertive, disciplining your children. Different things. After the program was done, West Ottawa was very pleased with the way that things were...

LW: The results that came from it?

CM: Yes. Then they were having an opening to work with the families and I applied there. So I was working mainly with the kids, to help them raise their grades with the MEAP test, which is a proficiency test for that middle school. I was visiting the families. But at that time in West Ottawa, the principal left to Peru, and another new principal came aboard. So things changed a little differently, and my role changed a little bit in the school. I decided at that time, it wasn't really what I wanted.

LW: What role did he try to move you into?

CM: It was more like helping in the classroom--in a way being a teaching assistant, and my background is not teaching.

LW: And that's not what you had started out to do.

CM: No. Therefore I found this opportunity in Child and Family Services where I was going to do prevention. And I decided to move on. I thought that the prevention field would help me to approach families with a whole content, and the children as well. That's why I moved to Child and Family Services. I am very pleased to be a part of Child and Family Services. I think that we are an honest agency. We really strive to help the community and address different issues, not only to the Anglo
community, but the Hispanic community as well. Everybody, blacks.

LW: Did you respond to an ad, or did you have a connection, or…?

CM: The person who was previous there, her name was Norma barring. She was a prevention specialist. Her husband at that time was working for Evergreen Commons. They decided to leave to another state; I think they went to Wisconsin. She called me and told me about this opportunity. Also, I spoke to another person who is a friend of mine who worked there. He's the director of the Hispanic program--his name is Julio Rios.

LW: I've already spoken to him.

CM: I spoke to Julio and he said that would be an ideal position for you. So I applied there, and I was interviewed three times.

LW: Vigorous interview process!

CM: It was wonderful. Everything went well.

LW: How long have you been there? When did you start there?

CM: I started to work there August 12th, 1996.

LW: A little over, maybe about a year and a half. Year and a quarter. Tell me about the issues you ran into in your first year there.

CM: Do you mean internal issues?

LW: I'm not really thinking of Child and Family Services as an organization, but the people who are coming in to Child and Family Services for services. Were there a lot of cases of substance abuse, or were the issues more other health related? Give me sort of a window as to...
CM: Because mostly I don't work for Child and Family Services as a therapist, my role there is prevention specialist. Therefore I don't work too much inside the agency, but I work outside into the school setting.

LW: Tell me what you do.

CM: Right now, I work in the school setting. I work with different population. Lots of Anglo, Hispanics, Asians, and I work from elementary kids to high school students. I teach life skills and substance abuse curriculum. I also work with the parents. Right now, I teach parenting education with a contract with FIA in Allegan through my agency. I also teach a monthly basis alcohol highway and safety education.

LW: Now the ______________ are to the kids themselves?

CM: No. The alcohol highway and safety education is mostly for the people who have been charged for drunken driving. Because I belong to Lakeshore Alcohol Council, it's been real helpful to me because that way I can address and encounter my community. And being someone who can help them to understand that alcohol, currently, is not socially acceptable any more. It's not seen as something like, okay, it's fine for you to drink as you please. That we need to set boundaries and see our own values. That's one of the things that families right now struggle when family has their own values, like from Mexico, Salvador, Honduras or Cuba, and then they come here, and the kids are more...they are cultural faster to the city and to the culture here. Then the people remain with their own culture.

RM: The kids get diluted real quickly, and for parents, that is a real struggle.

LW: So there is a lot of tension inside of the families, versus children who are more
Americanized and adults who are less.

CM: So it is very difficult.

LW: What ends up being the results of that? Without naming names, can you give me some examples of what tensions you've seen erupt in families?

CM: Miscommunication among parents and their children. Sometimes parents that have their lack of patience and they don't know how to discipline their children, and because of that, kids run away.

LW: Too harsh of discipline?

CM: Yes. A lot of gangs involvement because they don't feel that they belong to their families. Sometimes parents don't know how to balance the discipline and the nurturing concept of to being a parent.

LW: Do you think that's what's driving some of the gang activity that we see?

CM: Because I work with the children and the parents, so I can see the children's problem from their perspective and point of view and the parents' problem too. That's a point that I always try to get across to the parents that they need to balance that. They need to develop trust with their children. Please sit down these five or ten minutes and ask your children how their day went at school. You need that contact. You need to get involved in the school. Talk to the teacher, because if we don't get involved, how are we going to help the next generation that are going to be the leaders in our community?

LW: Have you had success in getting those individuals more involved in the school?

CM: As a matter of fact, last night, I was holding a class in a school setting, and I was
with parents. Two of the parents gave me testimony about how much they learned from the parenting skills that I had taught them, and how things are different now with their children.

LW: Very pleasing to hear that...

CM: It was very pleasing to me to see that, because they said now we are really taking the time and we know how. She said, "Before, I didn't even know if my child's teacher was sick. But now I check my homework, I sit down." And they have seen a lot of changes at home.

LW: Does language play a significant role in the difficulties? I'm sure that each individual case has a different level of language capacity among the parents. Is that part of the issue also, where the children know the English language, and they're working in an English setting, and the parents have more difficulty? Or is that really not an issue so much?

CM: I don't think so. Some parents, what I had seen is that they might not be able to be open to learn new skills and to modify their parental behavior.

(End of side A, tape 1)

CM: Not every child is born with a book under their arm. Saying, "Okay. This is what I want to do, and this is what I want."

LW: Wouldn't that be nice! (laughs)

CM: That would be very nice. Every child would be like a guide with him. I think that parents should be more open to educate themselves and learn new things in order to help their children, because maybe some issues they have had to address when they
were little, they're different from the issues that the kids are facing nowadays. So they need to be able to be open to learning new things and learning new concepts. I do the same thing with the children. I talk to them.

LW: I'm going to move back to Rene here. Tell me a little bit about your employment history. You came out of West Ottawa High School. Kind of pick me up there and tell me what you've done and where you are now.

RM: In my last year at West Ottawa, I worked out in the field in Old Dutch Gardens, lugging bulbs. That was real physical work out in the fields. From there I went right to a planter place called Rampack. They made garbage containers like for Jacobusses, the garbage trucks pick those things up on their little thing.

LW: I remember Jacobusses.

RM: Yes. We made stuff for them. I went in there as sweeper/apprentice welder. I was supposed to be a welder, but that was in '73 when there was tremendous layoffs, not just Michigan but throughout the nation. So I lasted there for about five months. It was a real nice place to work. I got along well with all the people. People from down south, we always called them hillbillies, for lack of a better word. There were a lot of people there with lower incomes and lower educated. Men who worked for a living. They didn't care if they could spell or write. They worked. I worked there for six months, got laid off. Ended up going to Meijers, Number 17, the store number there.

LW: This is the north side Meijers on Douglas?

RM: The old one. I applied there a couple times. "This guy's pretty big--probably push a
lot of shopping carts for us." I was seventeen when I graduated. Not for smarts, but just because that is the way things worked out for me. They wouldn't hire you without insurance? The guy said, "When you turn eighteen," which was October for me, "you come back." So it worked out pretty good because I got laid off in August. I went to go apply for him, and he goes "We'll make you a bagger." I thought, well, all right. I bagged for six or seven months, then they needed a guy in produce to unload the trucks, all by hand, all hand-jacks. I ended up at Meijers working for Gary Holmquist, who is a brilliant, nice person. He really was quite an influence on me without even knowing it. I worked for them until 1981. In 1977, I was working at Meijers, my uncle, Javier Ramos, worked MESC, said "CP is hiring over here, you ought to go check it out."

LW: Consumers Power?

RM: Yes. So I went and applied over there and he says, keep calling. So I called, and I called, and I called on a weekly basis. Finally, Kirk Welch called me back saying "We'd like to talk to you." Sitting at the bench talking and called me in. He gave me an interview and I went to work for Consumers Power. I kept both jobs. I worked at Consumers during the day as a janitor, and I worked all my extra hours and everything I could at Meijers. For two years I did that, almost three. Finally it just got to be...I worked 60 or 70 hours a week...

LW: Burns you out.

RM: Even though I was 23, pretty strong. It was one of the strongest points in my life. It even got to me. I thought what am I doing here? I have two or three checks in my
pocket all of the time, but I'm not going to do it. My friends, they're out having fun. At least I had a couple friends that would go out drinking with me and go to the movies. You know, whatever. I thought, man this is going to be a drag. In '81, I think it was, I quit Meijers and just started working Consumers Energy. Now it's called Consumers Energy. From being a janitor, I quit being a janitor and went out to fuel ran all the heavy equipment. All of these coal carts, you see the yellow and black see pox. Started running all of the equipment out there, heavy equipment, the loaders. From there I probably got sick of that, sucking all of the dust in, because there is diesel fumes and everything else. I started becoming an auxiliary operator now. That is what my job is now. I help control the fire in the boilers. That's pretty much what I've done. I also worked for Sealed Power in Zeeland.

LW: Was this a part-time thing while you were at CP...?

RM: I was working at Meijers by 1978, I needed more money I thought. So I went and looked for a full-time job at Sealed Power, Sintric Metals, actually. My job was standing in the conveyor belt...which was farthest between...a guy would put powdered metal at one end and mix this batch up. It would come through in molds through this furnace, and they would fuse this metal together. It was actually transmission parts for the Saginaw plant over there. I had these great big asbestos, well, not asbestos, that kind of material gloves on. My job was to take these pieces of hot metal, put them inside wire baskets. Take these wire baskets, we're talking sixty or seventy pounds a piece, put them on palettes. Luckily for me, one of the belts was done. So I only had to take care of two belts. That was absolutely horrible, that job.
LW: How long did you last there?

RM: I lasted there two weeks. I went up there and told the guy one night. Took my gloves, gave them to him, took my glasses off, set them on the counter. Told my foreman I wouldn't be back Monday. The look on his face was like I just told him that I just run into his car or something. He couldn't believe that I was quitting. I was making probably seven bucks an hour maybe, which is not too bad of money. I was making more money at Meijers. It ended my career there at Sintric Metals. It was just filthy.

LW: Tough job.

RM: Yes. People kept telling me, oh there's better jobs here. I looked around and thought...

LW: So Consumer's Power was there. That was a really good move, and it has worked out well for you, it sounds like.

RM: I'll be 21 years there in March. Already.

LW: It's amazing how time flies.

RM: And in between time, of course, we picked apples. I always picked apples, even after I graduated.

LW: I'm going to move in and ask some questions that are more standardized that we've been asking other people. These are going to be individual to you, but I mean, we've been asking other people these same kinds of questions. How has Holland changed in your experience from when you grew up, and I'm thinking now high school years--
late '70s, mid '70s, on to today. What kinds of things have you seen and what are your impressions?

RM: As a friend of mine at work told me, Holland has had diversity shoved down its throat. The Asians, Hispanics—used to be I'd come to town, if I saw a black, I knew who he was—a Staltmeyer, Ray Wells, a Brown. I pretty much knew who which family was. Starting about five years ago, I really started noticing more blacks and Hispanics. The days when you come to Holland, you couldn't find a gas station on Sunday open. You wanted something to eat on Sunday, you better have it at home and bought it yesterday. It really has exploded as far as the Dutch here have lost a lot of their identity. I see now that they're actually trying to bring that Dutch heritage back into... We've got Hispanics here who are doing things for the Hispanic community. I see the Dutch people now trying to bring their flag up and say "Hey! We were here first, and this is what we are. We're proud." It used to be, when I was growing up, being Dutch, you know "Ha! You're Dutch? I'm sorry! I'm sorry for you." That's the attitude people had. But now I see that Holland has grown quite a bit. As with all towns, it's not who you are, it's who you know. That's very much alive here in Holland. But that's, I think, society as a whole, I say her experiences at the universities. I've been with her all of the time. You can just feel it. Oh, this is going to go bad because this guy doesn't like you. For me I just sensed that with people.

CM: And I'm self-driven. I don't let people pull me down.

RM: Holland has changed. The '70s, I really didn't get to know too much. I'm all
clowning around with my friends, but once I got married and actually getting more involved in Holland. For me, Hope College is there. It doesn't affect me in any way. The only time I was affected, there's too many damn Hope College students in Skiles. Let's move them out. Or at the Pub, there's just too many of these kids in here. Let the people who work here, you guys go back home. That's how we felt. That's how I felt, and a lot of my friends felt. Hope College, we're not going to go to college, let alone a liberal arts college. We're going to learn how to repair air conditioners or body work, or something that I could relate to. I was never much of a student. I got out, but I was never a studious guy. But Holland has had an explosion hit it, and just look at buildings popping up in the cornfields I used to play in. All these people bringing all their different attitudes in, which is great to me. Holland has had it, like I said, shoved right down its throat and it's continuing to be changed with or without it's wanting to change. A lot of the attitudes are changing. I see the Asian community coming in. I used to hear a lot of negative things about the Asian community. Of course, that was right after Vietnam. I was just a teenager then. There was a lot of ill will toward the Asians because they knew these guys were being brought in by the church. The church is footing their whole bill. Going to the Hatch one time, a guy pulled in in a beautiful Trans-Am, powder blue Trans-Am. Here comes this little Asian out of there. This guy was wearing like a long, unusual clothing. We're all like, "Where'd this guy come from, man?" It was really bad. We thought, this guy's got everything. Everything is being handed to him. We kind of suspected that, but we never actually went out and said something to him.
RM: At least for me and my friends, this guy's getting everything handed...can't even speak English. Doesn't pay any taxes. Here's everything given to him on a platter. Look at the car he's driving. Here I've got a '70 Nova, this guy's got a brand new '74 Trans-Am. Powder blue, no less. It was kind of like that. I think now people are more open to seeing like the Hispanics I see. Some stay here and get food stamps, and they do need a little help. But these guys go to the store every week with their paycheck and spend a hundred fifty, two hundred bucks. They open their refrigerator up, and it's packed with food. They pay taxes on them. That's how they're helping. The Asians, those people are...their families stick together like velcro. They help each other out, they pull each other along. I've seen a lot of benefits for them. I think that the community is starting to see, "Hey these guys here, they're workers. They're not sitting here waiting like little birds in a nest. They're out looking for stuff." They're driven like my wife here. They're looking for things to do, they want to make a difference. Not so much in the community maybe, but they want to make a living for their children. They're looking out for their kids. I think that's one of the things that the Hispanics lack a lot here. The ones we have been involved with, with the migrants, because they come here just for a couple months, get their money saved, and then they go back. They don't have a really sound footing. Luckily, for me, Dad found a job. I was able to stay here, and I got an education, and got what I consider a very good job. Able to live a style, and live where I want to. Holland has had a tremendous influx of everybody here. I see
going by the cornfields, you see the combines get stuck now. Now it's just nothing but trailers. It makes me sad. I remember walking down those same roads, picking up, in April or May. You get a couple burlap bags, you start picking up beer bottles. We used to make four or five dollars an afternoon picking up beer bottles. For a kid who was fourteen, that's big money. Now, everyone's like, "dime deposit?" I've seen a guy stop in a Cadillac Seville, pick up two dimes and get back in. So the competition is tough! (laughs)

LW: It's not like it used to be! You should know I lived probably in what used to be your backyard. Our house is out there. Where do you live now?

RM: South of Fennville. We actually live in New Richmond. About five miles this side.

CM: In the country. Rural area.

LW: Tell me some of the organizations, and I'm asking you both this...I know you work for Child and Family Services, and you work for Consumers Power, but are you involved in other organizations, and could you tell me a little bit about those?

CM: I'll a busy lady! (laughs) I've been involved with the Red Cross since 1993 as a volunteer for HIV education, very concerned about HIV.

LW: That's a great topic I haven't had anyone talk about yet. Tell me a little bit about HIV in Ottawa County and what you have experienced.

CM: I've seen a lot of people at first, like when I went out to the community to educate _______ ton, to believe that dreadful disease could reach their houses, could reach their families. They were not very open to the information given. But now I have seen things are changing a lot. Things are not fully changed, but they have more
understanding regarding that problem.

LW: The possible risk.

CM: Yes.

LW: How many AIDS cases do we have at this time? Do you know?

CM: I don't have the stats in my head right now, and I don't want to mislead you. But maybe I can call later.

LW: Maybe you can add it when you edit the transcript.

CM: I've been involved a lot with the migrant population, because the language barrier sometimes places them at a higher risk for them not obtaining the right information.

LW: Is there a higher incidence of AIDS in the migrant community compared to the general population?

CM: Not necessarily, because I don't think it's higher promiscuity in the migrant population compared with our general population. I think that it's equal.

LW: You've been working on the education, and you haven't worked with any actual patients?

CM: No. I experienced once, when I was working for Holland Home Care, that's a part I haven't told you. I worked for Holland Home Care as a patient caregiver for three years and a half. Once I had opportunity to go to a house and take care of an AIDS patient. It was probably five years ago. At that time I can see people myself because I was of the medical field, I was not too much afraid. I was always studying and researching for that. But I had seen my other co-workers who went to the house who were a little afraid. They always thought that maybe the virus might have been
transmitted from casual contact.

LW: Despite all of the evidence to the contrary. The individual, did you deal with that individual more than once?

CM: With that patient?

LW: Yes, with that patient?

CM: I took care of that patient for two weeks.

LW: Do you remember what kind of issues that individual faced? Did that individual share those kinds of things with you?

CM: No. But I recall that person was very brave, very conscious of what's going on. I recall that person did not want compassion. They didn't want people to feel sorry. But only ones understanding about what was going on.

RM: I went to school with that particular person.

CM: To me that experience was very rewarding. To see how it was going down the hill, how the health was decreasing, but their spirit was lifted all of the time.

LW: This was at a late stage of?

CM: Yes, very late stage of AIDS. That person died, probably two to three months after I took care of her.

RM: She used to have a really nice garden at her house. And now you drive by it everyday and you can see the house, like her, is falling down, the garden is no longer.

CM: I hope that people would change and be more proactive and work together as a community with the HIV/AIDS issue. Like I've said, I've been involved since 1993.
LW: I know you don't know the numbers, but has it leveled off as general reports have indicated?

CM: It has been increasing, especially amongst women. Before you used to consider HIV and AIDS to be a homosexual problem. Now it is more heterosexual.

LW: Most of the growth is in heterosexual sex?

CM: Yes. But I think that even though we have medical advances in the HIV and AIDS field, we should fight with the anger that people have with homophobia, and not understanding the problem itself with our own issues. We have to deal with our own personal issues in order to be sensitive and be proactive, helping other people with HIV. Because if you are not able to understand those things within yourself, how are you going to be able to help others?

LW: That's right. Tell me about other organizations that you're involved in.

CM: Okay, that's one--the Red Cross. I've been involved with CARES, which is in Kalamazoo. Mostly they do education in the migrant population. I had done with them in the past because I had been trained as an educator, I've been trained as an IT, Instructor Trainer, through the Red Cross. So I'm able to train other people to become instructors, to be educators in the community. I also have been trained to do counselling and testing for HIV. I have done that with CARES--going to the migrant camps to provide...

LW: So you go there and then people can come to you and provide a sample?

CM: Yes. We have done risk assessments in the migrant population. Then we go into an educational session, and then we provide testing for them. I also recently became
involved with Hispanics Against AIDS, it's a new organization in Grand Rapids, where hopefully we're going to be targeting the Hispanic community broader, not only in Grand Rapids but in the midwest area, because sometimes the Hispanic, due to the lack of a language, they don't have access to proper care. I think I mentioned to you that I have been involved with Lakeshore Alcohol Council.

LW: Tell me about that. What does that organization do?

CM: Our main goals are to educate the community, schools, parents, about the results when alcohol is abused, or it has been abused by someone. To promote education, increase awareness in the alcohol field. It's been a great support for me because through my agency teaching Alcohol Highway and Safety...

LW: You deal with that right there on the front lines.

CM: Exactly. Right now we are trying to organize a MADD (Mothers Against Drunken Driving) chapter for Ottawa County.

LW: I should ask this just from the historical perspective, is it an organization that is working toward the elimination of alcohol consumption or simply the elimination of its abuse?

CM: Not elimination, because it is going to be hard for us to eliminate the alcohol problem, but help people to understand that they need to be responsible when they drink and drive, and maybe go to the legislative level to make the law harder for those people who drink and drive, which they do that in a very responsible way.

LW: Which we have already seen in some respects already occurring.

CM: To make the law harder. Let me see which else. When my church was burned,
which is St. Francis de Sales...

LW: I'm going to hold you off on that one because we are going to come back to the faith issue in just a minute. I want to hear about that, but I want you to hold that thought. Organizations that you were involved in?

RM: Not really, not any other at the beginning.

LW: Do you just work at the clinic?

CM: We're a team.

RM: I'm not the person in front, I'm the person in back. Sometimes with the paperwork she does, I do some of her editing. The only problem she has is on her past and present tenses. So I do a lot of that correcting and... That's pretty much what I do as far as being involved is kind of like behind her. She does all of the front work. She's done tremendous at Child and Family. I've really not been involved in anything by myself, say I'm going to go out and be a part of Nights of Columbus. I got asked to join the Elks. That's about it. Other than that, when we had the tutorial program at the West Ottawa Middle School, I did a lot more then. I was involved there for a little while, but when they changed her roles...

CM: You were a volunteer for West Ottawa.

RM: Yes, I volunteered for West Ottawa, that was my job there.

CM: As a tutor.

RM: My job mostly was, at that point, calling Grand Valley or Ferris State University, even we had a thing with Hope here which tutored students arranged for us. Tour guides, see what they could give us--at least feed the kids and could they give them a
T-shirt or a frisbee. That's what I did behind her. After they changed her job to more or less "Go make a copy of this for us, and you work with that student," I thought well, now I'm only working with one or two people here instead of forty or fifty like where we were before, so I had to make a decision. I like you own a house, and there is always something to do with the house, and that's what I do now. It's more or less do projects and putter around. I like gardening, but, organizations, I'm the corrector of the papers.

CM: He does a wonderful job at home.

LW: Do you have children?

CM: No. We have three dogs.

LW: Three dogs? Keeps you busy. We have one and that's a handful. Let's get back to the faith issue. You started talking about working with the church and I think this will lead us to that issue. More generally, does the church play a role in your life, you were talking about Noordeloos earlier, but I assume those things have changed since those years. I don't care which of you wants to start.

CM: To me, church, it's very important. I see church as a support column for me, especially with our leader, which is Father Steve Dudek. I recall when I came to Holland, I didn't know anybody here. I went to St. Francis, and I found Father Steve. He was my mentor at that time, so he guided me to the migrant health clinic. Through him, I found my first job. I would say that Father Steve is a person that I can trust, and if I do have some issues that are bothering me, I feel comfortable sitting down with him and telling him up front what is going on. I know that he is going to
keep that to himself. Seems like probably five to six years ago, I've been involved as a lector in church, reading maybe three to four times a year. Maybe I might not go to church every Sunday, but church is very important. When the church burned down, we both were asked to be part of the building committee. But at that time, I was involved with another committee within the church, which was, I forgot the name, but it was called the Hispanic Committee. Something that was more targeted toward the Hispanic population. So I asked Father Steve if it was possible for me to be the liaison between the Hispanic community and the building committee. What I was doing was translating the update information about the church process and reading that on a monthly basis to the congregation.

LW: How about for you, Rene?

RM: Even when I was younger, my parents, we didn't have time to go to church. So I've never been really heavily involved in church. I started getting involved a little bit through her, my wife. The one thing that bothered me the most about church, it's like with any organization which I consider it as an organization, it's the little cliques they have. No matter, even if it's church, there's only one God, in most people's eyes. The little niches and cliques, "You're not part of our group," that bothered me. I'm the kind of person, you do me wrong, don't expect me to come around again. That's the Dutch part of me. (laughter) I'm not kidding you, man. People say, "Are you American or are you Hispanic?" I say "I don't look Dutch to you? Look at me." (laughter) I have to admit that is something that is my worst, to be my worst fear of myself. I hold a grudge to the day you throw the dirt on the box. That is the kind of
person I am. I saw some of the things that Clara suffered with the church, and I start thinking "Why? This is a church, we're all equal under one eye here. But why is this happening?" I'm thinking, the little infight, the little bickering. I have offered myself to church as far as even like, I got a pick up truck and big arms. I can go lug furniture for you. I can collect...I collect clothes from people at work.

CM: We do that a lot.

RM: For St. Vincent's and stuff. Little things like that I can do.

CM: Maybe taking clothes to the migrant community. Not necessarily through the church, but as our mission as Christians. So we ask people, can we have some clothes? Or maybe some furniture, or household?

RM: Pop cans, glasses, anything.

CM: Then we take them to the migrant community.

LW: Are you still doing that? As an aside, I have clothes in my car that I was going to bring over to the mission if you would like them.

CM: Oh sure.

LW: They're literally in my car today.

CM: Definitely.

LW: At the end of the interview I'll go out with you and bring them to you.

CM: Okay, definitely. Because some places, they sell them, so you have to pay...like if you go to, what's this store here in Lakewood?

LW: The Goodwill store.

CM: The Goodwill. There you have to pay. And some people, they don't have really...
money. Especially the people who are coming...like for instance, this past Sunday, that was a big opening in church. Finally we opened St. Francis, and I was talking to Fanny Tavares and she was telling me that she was dealing with a family that came from Mexico and they decided to stay in town. They are not going back. They need that.

LW: They don't have any winter clothes, probably.

CM: As far as like Rene said, the political issue always is going to be political. Doesn't matter where you go, church or whatever. That's something that I have learned to overcome and maybe place my faith in order to not think about those political issues in the church setting. I know that if I go to church, it's because I just feel like looking for my spiritual satisfaction, rather than whatever problems lie within the church. Because I had asked, that was something that was bothering me too. I had spoken to other people who belonged to other congregation, and they had told me that there is always politics within the church setting.

LW: That is true of probably every organization.

CM: Exactly, so we should not really let those political issues guide us.

LW: Thinking more generically now of Holland as a community, do you have any thoughts on what role the church plays in Holland?

RM: Quite a bit. Father Steve Dudek, I really admire that person. Not just as a priest, but I think he's got very qualified leadership. When I talk to Father Steve, I know I am talking to somebody who can do a lot of things at one time. He's under a lot of pressure. When the church burned down and I saw him, we had dinner, I could tell
this guy was stretched out like a piece of gum. Church is gone, where are we going to have church, and we had a lot of problems. I wished I could have helped him somehow, but I couldn't do that, because I don't want to get involved. I don't want to be pulled in. I don't mind helping out from the outside, but I don't want you to start relying on me all the time. Inconsistency is one of the biggest problems of my life. I'm not consistent, consistent, consistent. I'll help you and stuff, but don't start pressuring me. That is something, a character flaw that I don't know if I'll ever overcome. But Catholic churches have really done some tremendous help. They've helped us to be able to help other people for buying glasses for somebody in __________, or giving them a table or finding them someplace to eat through the church.

CM: Maybe for medical treatment, when I approach them and ask them for help, because I am more in contact with certain people that might need the help.

RM: The church I think has helped a lot, and there's a lot of people that are really good there that want to help. Fanny Tavares, tremendous person. She came here not learning any English. She has really put her feet down and she is taking classes. I admire her, because it's like my wife here. Eight years, she didn't speak very well, but it's got to be hard. It's got to be real hard. I've improved my Spanish a lot from her.

LW: Do you think that there are good relationships between the Protestant and Catholic churches in Holland, for the most part?

CM: I think that it is a good relationship. Especially in the past two years, like when we
encounter our fatality that our church burned down, we found the Third Reformed Church, on Pine and Maple, and they opened their arms to us. I think that really kind of helped us to become more connected. Like this past Sunday when I saw the service, and I saw all of these, like the priests from the Catholic church and the ministers from other churches, it was so uplifting to see all of this community together, the mixture. It was there like the Vietnamese community, the Hispanic community, the Anglo community. Everybody together, as a big and strong family. It was wonderful. It was a wonderful experience.

LW: It probably wouldn't always had been that way, historically.

CM: No, but it was a start. Maybe for us to get together, sometimes things happen. Like after our church burned down, that was a beginning for us to start something new in history. So I see that even though it had this sad part, but I see the positive side of that experience, because it brought us together as a community.

LW: Yes, that's good. This is a question I have been asking everyone. As you see it, what role does Hope College play in the community? You mentioned in passing a little while ago, your impressions.

RM: It used to be, there were a couple girls here, Salt and Pepper they were called, they would do a radio show. That started to help people a little bit because it was...of course you had a Hispanic and an American girl here, and Salt and Pepper. I don't know if they came to the church or someplace. I saw them two girls together and said that's funny, Salt and Pepper. I had only heard them on the radio. That helped a lot with people with the Hope College. At least we knew somebody there. Now you've
got an evangelist here, Santo Figeroa. He does a radio show through these guys. I think that helps a lot. For me, growing up here, Hope College was, yeah, those nice buildings over there.

LW: But no contact.

RM: No. What does Hope College do for Holland High, for Holland? I thought, well, I have no idea. I’ve never involved in anything that Hope ever presented here. I never had seen anything. For me being out in the camps and stuff, to me we used to have churches come out there and give us stuff--toothpaste and stuff. Then as an adult, I never really got involved with anything that Hope College had done here, honestly. I didn’t know what Hope, other than it was a college. Flying Dutchman, they have a pretty good football team. Personally, I still even, right now I’ve got to tell you I don’t know all what Hope College does for Holland. It supplies sometimes the students go out and get involved with other schools and stuff. So I know they do, only because at West Ottawa I saw we got some kids to come out and help us. Other than that, I can’t tell you what else Hope College does as a institution for Holland.

LW: How about for you, Clara?

CM: I don’t know too much about Hope College. I see Hope College as a very positive institution because I think that providing Holland with an opportunity to bring in kids from all over the state and from other states. Those kids get involved in different settings. For instance, Child and Family Services, we have a program called Big Brothers and Sisters. Sometimes we match some Hope College students to be big brothers or big sisters to our children in need. In my past experience, when I used to
run the tutorial program for the Catholic church in West Ottawa, I had some Hope College students who my contact person was Alfredo Gonzales. I came here and spoke to him, and I explained to him what I was looking for, and he connected me with some Hope College students and they were mentors for my program. So I am very pleased, even though I don't know too much about Hope, but it has been a positive experience for me.

LW: I need to ask this probably of you, Rene, because you've been in Holland a long time. How has the role of women changed in Holland? Do you have any thoughts on that at all? Are there more opportunities for women that you've seen in the workplace where you've been, for example?

RM: Oh yes. It's helped, it's opened up to where a woman can go and actually have a chance for a job instead of them just patting her and "Yeah, yeah, go through the motions." She actually is in the competition. I work with one woman in my department, Linda Verburkmas. Hell of a worker. She's a go-getter. Verburkmas, she's Dutch, you know, I rub it in to her every chance I get. (laughter) We're very good friends, though, and she gives it to me back. I always got something back. But I think that has helped a lot. It's no longer just, "Oh, you're going to be a cashier now, or a teacher." Now there's lawyers, there's policewomen. To me that's a big step forward. To see the other girls see it, "Oh, there's a woman in that cop car." That really to me has changed a lot here in Holland. I think the biggest change for Holland is the people from Grand Rapids coming over here. I think because Grand Rapids has been such a large city for a long time, they're just more open. And they
come over here to work, look for a job. They're more willing to accept a Hispanic or black, saying "What are you like?" instead of saying "This guy is not white. We've got to be careful of this guy. You don't know, he probably going to steal something."

LW: So you're thinking that the employment opportunities have expanded?

RM: Yes.

LW: Not just for women, but for Hispanics and other minorities as well, because of the growth and the new perspectives that are coming?

RM: Just a different attitude here. Like I said, back when you couldn't find a gas station on Sunday. You think they're going to hire some guy to watch your building on Sunday afternoon if the guy wasn't named Verhoef? And didn't have blonde hair? No. We don't want this guy alone in the building. I remember when my dad used to work at Big Dutchman, we used to take care of the eggs there...another little thing I used to go hang out with them. We collected eggs on Sunday afternoon. Why? Because nobody else wanted to be there on Sunday. So, that was one of my jobs. My dad and I used to walk over there, from 112th. But it has changed a lot here. Women now, when they go to an interview for a job, they're in the competition. It's not a "Well, we'll just walk through it, and okay, she's gone now. Let's put her under the pile here." They have a real chance at anything that is available here in Holland.

CM: I think also that women are looking more for higher education. They have become more conscious about their role, what type of role they play in society. They're not
submissive anymore. They have become more aggressive. Look at me. I like challenges.

LW: Do you feel, in the eight years you have been here, that there is still a glass ceiling, as it is sometimes referred to, or do you observe that in settings?

CM: What do you mean by glass?

LW: A point to which women are allowed to rise in an organization, but then tend to run into barriers getting to the very top positions?

CM: Definitely.

LW: Still feel that that is a very operative thing here?

CM: Definitely. I think that it is not going to be only here. In society at all. I think that by history, women have always played, if you want to call them, like a second citizenship role. It is going to take a while for us to really be an equal counterpart with the males.

LW: What impact, Clara, has the increased ethnic diversity of Holland had? Have you any thoughts on that? As Holland has grown, our ethnicity has become more broad, more ethnicities here. What impact do you think that has had, from your point of view? Especially somebody who is relatively new in town yourself. Or I can let you dwell on that and come back to it.

CM: Okay.

LW: Okay, I'll let you dwell on that and we'll come back to it. What controversies, Rene, have you witnessed in Holland that come to mind? You mentioned the Sunday issue a couple of times. That was obviously a controversy and picketed...
RM: I was there they opened on Sunday.

LW: You were there that day?

RM: Oh yes. I worked at Meijers on that Sunday they opened, the first day there. They had probably six or seven people in there. I worked in the produce department. They had the lettuce back there. Not many people came in that first day, and a lot of people kind of looking around like, "Hey." Like this is pretty close to two stories tall in here. Where did these people come from? They were, I don't know if they were going to the beach or what they were doing. It wasn't too bad the first day. My problem was, when the work week became Monday again, I had an old lady, an elderly woman come up to me. She says to me, "Was this store open yesterday?" I said "Yes, Ma'am, they just opened yesterday." She goes, "That is the most terrible thing, that you would open on the Sabbath. Open on a Sunday, a day of praise for the Lord." I looked at her and said, "Ma'am, I'm just an employee here. I have nothing to do with the working hours." She goes, "Did you work yesterday, young man?" I started thinking, I better not say I did. I was expecting, I'm going to get a sermon now if I say yes. I said, "No ma'am," I thought, well, what's a little white lie? I said, "No Ma'am, as matter of fact, I wasn't allowed to work. That's for the people with the most seniority. For guys like me with less seniority didn't want to be there on a Sunday." She goes, "Well that was very good of you. You should not work on a Sunday. Keep it holy." She really laid into me. I thought, man, please, I've got things to do. I was always as polite as I could be when I was at the store,
because I thought I am representing the store here, you know. She really let me have
an earful there. But after about a month into it, it was like it was a regular thing
then. They always say, yeah, this guy went to church on Sunday, and he should have
a halo above his head, and he doesn’t drink. Yeah, he doesn’t drink in public, but he
goes home and goes down to his basement. "Come on up, boys." I hear a lot of that,
or I see a lot of that thought process, where in front of you I’m like this, but behind
you, it’s like "Hey, man, bring us another beer over here." A regular life. That was
kind of difficult the first bit of Meijers being open on Sunday. There weren’t any
people there. I didn’t get to see the picketing outside. I was in the back, so I didn’t
see any of that. But I’ve heard about that. The only experience I had was with that
one particular elderly woman. I must admit I made a lot of friends at Meijers. I met
people who would come in, they just want to talk. Sometimes elderly people just
want to come in and tell you about their dog, they just had an operation, or that their
daughter was doing this or that. I made a lot of friends there.

LW: Any other controversies that come to mind that Holland’s had over the last twenty or
thirty years?

RM: Nothing I really have experienced. I know there was a lot of, as always the Hispanics
and the police here have always, there was never any Hispanics, my cousin Rudy is a
detective now and stuff. I saw him work through the ranks. He used to walk the beat
out here. We used to hang out. People like him have made a change, going through
it. I think the Dutch community here is like, "I’m not going to give you nothing until
you absolutely earned it. You show me that you deserve that." That’s how they were
here. I think that has changed quite a bit. As far as controversies go, the police are always the police. They only show up when there is something bad happening. I've never been involved in anything like that.

LW: Are you pretty pleased with the diversity in the force that you observe now?

RM: More now, in the last couple years. I've only been involved with the police one time where I had my ankle broken pretty bad. That was just, well, everyone was out drinking. For me, I was pretty upset at the police because the first thing that the police guy told me, I can't think of his name... but Halloween night I got beat up real bad in '83. I mean, very bad. Left unconscious. When I was able to get around on crutches and stuff, and I was all smashed up, I went to see the police guy. I was like, "Hey, my name is Rene, I'm here to make out a report and finish this and stuff." And I start asking him some questions and stuff about his investigation. He put his pen down and goes "Listen. I'm not here to do any investigating that's going to allow you to sue these people. I'm not here just as your personal investigator." And I start thinking, "What are you talking about? I just want to know what's happening. These guys almost killed me. I was unconscious." The heckles in my neck stood up. Who is this guy? I was only 24 when it happened. So I said to him, "I'm not going to ask you to do anything for me. I'm just asking you to do your job. These guys about did me in. And you're telling me this? You don't think they did me wrong?" "Well, everyone was drinking and nothing is really clear." I go, "Oh, so you think I ought to just let this go." He said, "Well I didn't say that." I said, "Why don't you let me go outside, get my tire iron out of my car, come inside here and break your ankle,
bust your fibia, knock all of your teeth out, break your elbow. Just work you over
good. And let's just see if you let it drop." And he kind of looked at me and goes,
"I understand. This is real personal for you." I said, "Look at me. Cast, crutches,
my teeth are gone, my face is swelled up like a pumpkin. Why don't you let it go?"
From that day on, he was much more polite to me. I thought, well good, at least the
guy's helping.

LW: In a way, you've sort of sensitized him to an issue there, it sounds like.

RM: I kind of thought, what's your problem man? I'm not asking you to be Colombo for
me. I'm just asking you, what are you going to do? That was terrible. That whole
ordeal for me was terrible. That was the only problem I had. I've heard other people
had problems as far as with police go. But as you get the overall picture, you get, oh,
this guy is drinking.

LW: Let me ask you a related question. Do you feel that the justice system is treating
offenders the same, regardless of race, or do you feel that ethnicity or racial issues are
coming in to the way the courts are dealing with offenders?

CM: I think it does. And that is something that I asked one of the police officers. I asked
him, that I was very concerned because with some of the clients that I have
encountered that had been arrested for drunken driving. They had told me that, when
they were arrested, the police asked him if he was willing to take a breathalyzer test.
He agreed, but the police did not understand what he was saying. So they reported
that the client refused to take a breathalyzer, and the charges were more. I spoke to
one of the police officers, and I told him what was going on. He expressed to me
very sadly that some of the new officers are really arrogant. In his experience, he had encountered several things. So race, definitely it is an issue.

LW: In law enforcement, race is playing some issue.

RM: A friend of ours got hit by somebody right in front of his house. He speaks English, not tremendous, but he's bilingual, more or less. He asked, "Where is your insurance?" The girl had no insurance. So the cop comes up and takes the report and stuff. The guy asked, "What are you going to do, this girl has no insurance? What am I going to do?" It didn't really hurt his car, so he really wasn't concerned. But he wanted to know what was going to happen. This girl had no insurance. The police told him to not to be bothering him. Get in your car, we've taken care of your half, you let me take care of this gal over here. He heard nothing more about it, so he never had his question answered, and she was American. He had sincere feelings, he thought, "Wow, they'll probably let her go." But he told me, "If I had not had insurance, I'd have been back at that car for twenty minutes filling out the paperwork, and then had a ticket written." He really believed that. I have had other people, just like my wife says...because the policeman walks up to somebody, "Oh, it's a Mexican guy. He hardly speaks English." It irritates him. "Here you are in America, and you don't even speak English. And now you're trying to talk to me and I'm supposed to help you?" I really do believe that, like she said, there's police that, because you don't speak English, you obviously don't care, and I don't care what happens to you. That is one thing that I do believe. I haven't experienced it. I'll tell you one thing that I experienced. I was working on my trailer, I own this little trailer. I came in, I
was doing plumbing underneath the trailer, filthy. I had to get some other parts. I stopped over here at Family Fare on the north side. Stopped, I got a glass, something to buy in there. I'm standing there in line, and I'm dirty. I'm wearing a flannel shirt, and I've been crawling under this trailer like an animal. I got up in line, and the girl at the cashier looked at me like, "Damn Mexican." Just the look she gave me was, "Dirty Mexican." I'm very sensitive to that kind of thing. I can feel things, when someone looks at you, you know if they like you or not. I think I'm very good at that. So I thought, "Oh, this chick here thinks I'm a migrant probably from Zelenkas out here." So I put my food on the counter and stuff and she looks at me. She didn't say nothing to me, so I looked at her and said "Hey, what's up with you? Kind of busy today, aren't you?" And right away, her whole attitude changed toward me. She goes, "Oh, this guy, obviously he's not from the field." I said, "What's with you today? You get off work pretty soon here?" I started talking to her. Her whole attitude changed toward me. I thought that's probably what the police looked like when they see a Mexican guy wearing his sombrero, his little hat, and big buckle, driving a pick-up truck. They probably think, "Oh, he's already got an attitude. He's got an attitude, and I'm going to pull this guy over. I got him. This guy is a Mexican, probably doesn't speak English. Probably doesn't have any insurance." To me, it all comes together as a package with some of these police. When you get some of these young police, I only know my cousin Rudy, as a detective, but I know somebody who is a policeman in Grand Haven. Just listening to some of the stories, arrogant is a good word to use, about some, especially on the younger police cops.
They haven't experienced anything other than the good life here in Holland. Always on the basketball team, always had everything, now they're out serving and protecting people. They really haven't had enough experience in life to really understand. "Look at this poor guy who just came up here from Mexico. Just trying to make ends meet, to make his life a little better, where I've had everything." They don't see that. They say, "Yeah, I'm going to pull this guy over." That study just came out awhile ago where there's more Hispanics, more minorities arrested and processed through, as opposed to Americans. The language barrier and part of it is the attitude. I don't care what police tell me, "Oh no, it won't happen." I told that to a police one time. His face became red immediately. I says, "Oh, yeah, like you're my friend, you're going to look out for me." Oh man, he was angry immediately. I looked at him like, "I could care less what you feel. I'm telling you what I'm thinking. You asked me is what I told you. You didn't like the answer." I haven't had a problem. That was quite a long time ago.

CM: To me it's real difficult because I'm not excusing those people who drink and drive. I'm an educator, but at the same time I think that they should be more sensitive.

LW: They should be at least equally dealt with, is what I am sensing from what you say.

CM: Yes, and unfortunately, they don't have any translator in the police department, because I already found out, who can maybe help those people there. They have quite a few police officers who are bilingual, but they don't have that many.

LW: So unless the officer is bilingual and happens to be involved in the situation...

CM: How are you going to understand my point of view, or how are we going to
communicate if you don't speak the language? So that's going to be a language barrier.

RM: You've got to remember that these people who are out in the camps, like whenever the police show up, something bad is going to happen, something bad has already happened, it's in the process of going on, the police are here, the only things that's going to happen--someone is going to be taken out. So the minute the cops show up, the heat's there, don't know nothing, get away from him, leave him alone. Okay, now you have this family suffering, and nobody wants to get involved. The police come in, what happened here? Some may be bilingual, they may not be. Husband beat the wife up, the wife claims that she does it. Sorry, let's go. Now don't fight with it, let's go. They're pretty docile. Once the police show up, they're pretty good. That's what they see, the police are here, trouble's happening. Let's get away. We don't want to cooperate with the police. That's how it is.

CM: Unfortunately.

LW: Have the problems and concerns of average Holland citizens changed over the last thirty years, do you think?

RM: Oh yes, to me, safety. It used to be leave the house, don't worry. The house doors open, the windows are open, the screens. Now, lock that door. Don't go out at night. Don't be picking up any hitchhikers. If you don't know that person unless you're in a real public setting, don't make eye contact, because he might want something from you. I think for me the biggest thing as far as safety, that goes right in hand with the gangs that are happening in Holland. I have never been involved,
myself, with any gangs. I've talked to members, I know a couple. My brother Juan, he's involved with the boxing club a lot more than I am. He lives in Holland here. To me, the community is very afraid of a group of Hispanics or Asians, to see them in the malls. See four, five, or six Asian kids there...

CM: Even in the school setting, that is a big issue.

LW: So just the fact that there are five of them together, they're automatically labeled as being assumed to be a gang?

CM: Not only labeled, but they might make some remarks, or when somebody passes through the hallway, or is walking in the hallway, if a group of people are together, and they make some remarks and start laughing and maybe look at another person in a very inappropriate way, people feel intimidated. That's one of the issues in the school setting that we're dealing with right now.

RM: Especially groups who speak. You walk by and your wife walks by and you're passing Hispanics, and they might say something and start laughing.

CM: In Spanish, that could be threatening.

RM: I was in Burger King yesterday. There were four guys, four Dutchmen there. I'm assuming they're Dutch, because they were all wearing those funny little hats that they wear. I don't know what you call it. They were talking about the stock market, about Pepsi-Cola. I was kind of listening to them. Five of them, all retired obviously. One was talking, just giving some kids a ride to Holland High School. He came back and got his coffee. Three Hispanics at the counter. They were all speaking Spanish to each other. Well this Dutch guy comes up there, and walks up to
them and orders a cup of coffee. They continued to speak Spanish. He goes, "Hey," they obviously go in there quite a bit. He goes, "Are you guys talking about us again?" They all got a big chuckle out of it. But that's something to me, like, if they didn't know each other, these guys would probably be upset, hearing these guys all speaking Spanish, all standing there, just in general, looking out into the lobby there. That bothers people. It does. It bothers people that you're not speaking English at times, that you can't speak English. I think sometimes it irritates people, a little bit.

LW: It feeds into a stereotype.

CM: That's one of the things that I always try to, when I would speak to a new person, who is new in the community, I try to encourage that person, you need to learn the language. I was in that situation when I came here. If you don't learn the language, how are you going to be an active part of a community where you live? How are you going to be able to address the problems in the community and help to solve those problems if you have a language barrier? I think it is very important. Some people have resistance to that. They feel that, "I'm Hispanic, I don't have to do anything with the English language. I don't have to learn the culture here." To me, that is a big mistake because we can integrate our culture and combine those two things and learn. Because really, that's what diversity is. It's a different way of thinking, not really by races and languages.

LW: It's increasing understanding, right? Just a couple more things and then we'll wrap up here. Tell me about someone, who, if there is anyone, who has served as a mentor for you.
RM: For me, probably without even realizing it, probably Gary Holmquist, my first boss that I had outside the fields at Meijers Thrifty Acres. He was always real fair, too fair, sometimes. He was a working manager with us. Without really knowing, he kind of taught me how to handle people, how he wanted me to dress a little bit. He was always willing to kind of work with me and stuff. He always was fair. He didn't care who you were or what you were, just as long as you did your job, don't mess around too much, don't be outside laughing at the customers. He was always good to me. I think as far as all of the people I've worked with and known, Gary was one of the people that I think a lot of things back now, what he did and some of the things we put him through. But we were kids, you know?

LW: Clara, do you have anyone?

CM: Does it have to be here in the community?

LW: No, it does not.

CM: My mentor was my brother Juan. Currently, he's a lawyer. He lives in my country. I'm the fourth in the family. He's the third. We are four years apart. But I recall when I was growing up, he always enjoyed reading, and he's very outspoken and a very smart person. He always told me, "Clara, I think that rather instead of you wasting time going out with your friends, you should really start reading." So he encouraged me to start reading different books. He always taught me to look for more within myself, and in the environment, when I was surviving, or I was leaving. He not only helped me concentrate in my present, he helped me to concentrate on more what type of role I was going to play in the future in this society, as a person
and as a female. I think that he was the inspiration for me, to be the person that I am today. Besides, I am a self-driven person. I'm curious. I like to look for things. I like to do research. I recall when I was going to go to medical school. We have three doctors in my family: my older brother, my father, and myself. I think that for my mother, it was too much for her to see my two people going into the medical field. I recall that she sent different people, like my teachers in the high school, for them to convince me not to go into the medical career.

LW: Couldn't do it?
CM: No, they couldn't do it.
LW: Is there anything we haven't covered? I have other things that I could ask you, but I think that we have taken enough of your time already. Is there anything we haven't covered that we should talk about?
CM: No, it was like the ethnicity thing that you asked me that I wasn't sure.
LW: Oh that's right we were going to come back to that. Do you have any thoughts that came up since we...?
CM: What was the question?
LW: I think we were generally talking about how the ethnic diversity, which has increased dramatically in Holland, the role that has played, or what impact you have maybe seen, as someone who is a relatively new resident?
CM: I think that we have enriched our community, providing different ideas, different cultural background. It would be more social issues that maybe the community would have to encounter, because we are from different areas, different social, demographic
backgrounds, and we might have different problems. But at the same time, I feel it has been a positive change, or positive contribution to the community. Because the more challenged you are and the more problems you have to solve, the more sharpened you become to receive or to encounter other future difficulties. That's how I feel.

LW: I think that a good number of people feel that way.

RM: From my personal, my parents come in here and laying a job and stuff. My parents worked very hard to keep us together and keep us in school. They both have passed away now, but I see that mirrored in so many other families coming up here and trying to make a go. The way the cost of food is and everything here. The struggle's gotten not any easier for those people. There's more people like myself and Clara that are willing to help, but...Now I'm not much involved with the community, even less than I used to be. At times I feel guilt. I feel like I have such a good life. I don't share enough of it. But you get so involved in your own life, and doing things that you want to do. You've got goals that you're aiming for. I think that I'm very lucky that I was brought here in Holland. After I've travelled the United States a little bit, this is a beautiful area. And anyone who comes here and doesn't see that, has got to have no eyes.

CM: It is a beautiful area.

RM: We have everything. I think people here are, as a rule, women like Eleanor Baker, Birdie Ott I used to work with, Clara Visser, I worked with her husband Gary in Consumers. Women like them really welcomed me to Meijers, made it easier for me
to come out of the fields and start dealing with all of these people. I used to feel like a stiff board. They kind of loosened me up, and talked to me, and brought out a little more personality. Holland is growing, like I said, diversity was being crammed down its throat in the beginning. I think now it's more to a point where it's coming. The houses are coming up just like new grass in the spring, all around us. If Holland's not willing to accept it and change, I think it's going to be more problems. I think there are a lot of people trying to open the doors and see things a little more. As far as the police part goes, I think most police have a chip on their shoulder. That is a personal opinion only. You want to be a policeman because you want that little bit of power. Not everyone is like that, maybe people actually go in there that way, after awhile they get comfortable with their role. They see they can use it for good, not just like, "Hey, not because I can. Because I want to."

CM: There are a lot of good policemen, officers. I work very close with some of them, and they have been very helpful. They're very sensitive people. One of them is Mark Bos. I work very closely with Mark Bos, through Lakeshore Alcohol Council, and he's been a wonderful person. Also, Harry, I forget his last name. We're trying to organize on that chapter. They always been very helpful. Good resource for me. But I think that we should be more proactive, and become more involved in our community, because sometime it is so easy to take a laid back position. Okay, I'm here, you're there.

LW: I've taken a lot of your time today, and I want to thank you for sitting down with me for what has been almost two and a half hours. So I think I am going to draw us to a
close, and thank you very much.

CM: Thank you, Larry.