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Ramirez, Aden Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Larry Wagenaar
Oral History Interview with Aden Ramirez

(unedited)

Conducted November 5, 1997 by Larry Wagenaar

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
LW: Aden, could you please state your full name and place of birth for me, just to get started?

AR: Aden David Ramirez, and I was born in Imlay City, Michigan, which is east of Flint, Michigan, about thirty miles east of Flint. Born and raised here in Michigan. Went to school here, went through high school through Imlay City, and then went to Central Michigan University and did my undergraduate work at Central Michigan University, and graduated from Central Michigan in 1972. I received a teaching job in Alpena, Michigan, that summer, and so I started my teaching career in Alpena in 1972 through 1978, I was there. I was a foreign language teacher at Alpena High School. Then I was invited to interview at West Ottawa Public Schools for a Spanish teaching position here in 1978. I did come and interview and was offered the position, and so I taught at West Ottawa High School for two years, and then moved on to the position that I am in now, which is Director of Migrant and Bilingual Education Programs for West Ottawa Schools and have been at that position going on twenty years.

LW: You obviously enjoy the job.

AR: Yes, it's been very fulfilling. It has been a very good experience. When we first came to Holland, our immediate impression was how things were at a complete standstill on Sundays in terms of the commercial end of it. There weren't a lot of
restaurants at the time, and lodging obviously was extremely limited - you were pretty much limited to the Blue...

LW: The Blue Mill Inn...which was new at that time.

AR: Right, The Blue Mill Inn Motel. We lived in Holland proper for two years. My first two years that I taught at West Ottawa High School, we lived on Sixteenth street, so that gave us a real sense of the Hispanic community in Holland, and their impact, if you will, and contributions to the daily life of Holland. In 1980, we moved to the north side, which is part of my employment condition. As an administrator of a district, they would like for you to be living within that district. So we did buy a home here on the north side and have been in the same home since 1980. I have a daughter, Vanessa, who is a sophomore at Hope College, and a son, Gabriel Aden, who is employed as a market and sales representative for Semco Gas Company here in Holland. And a wife, Connie, who has been my partner for twenty-six years, going on twenty-seven. My impression of Holland has changed through the years, in terms of my perspective of the dynamics that impact the city such as Holland because of the rich Dutch influence and historically. Being a Dutch community, however, having come here in 1978 to the present, I have seen some tremendous changes, both in the demographics and also, I think, attitudinal changes have occurred in terms of the different ethnic groups in Holland maintaining relationships and evolving into different interactions amongst the different groups that represent Holland today. So, that has been a real revelation in terms of the changes that have occurred from... well, for me, for almost 20 years that I’ve been here.
LW: Tell me how those demographics—you mentioned two issues—how the demographics have changed.

AR: Well, when I first came here, I believe that it was about that time that we had, really, the first wave of the Asian refugees, immigrants that were coming in, being sponsored by many of the churches and other organizations in Holland. So, that sort of was a turning point for Holland in terms of acclimating to a new population, a different perspective and mores and values that these people brought into the community. I know that prior to my coming here, there was already an established Hispanic population in Holland, and that has continued to grow as well. But, I think a dramatic change that I saw was the Asian population that moved into Holland during the few years that I was still living in Holland. The first five years, I think between 1978 and 1983-84, was when I observed the tremendous growth in our Asian population in Holland. So I think that that was another stage of evolution for Holland in terms of embracing the diversity that they now represent in its population. It's been interesting to see that change.

LW: How do you feel the attitudinal landscape has changed?

AR: Well, I believe people have learned a little bit more about other groups, their cultural background, and their heritage. Through different events that I have observed throughout the years, I know that they, both the community as well as the particular groups, have tried to promote a sense of understanding, and if nothing else, a sense of tolerance amongst the different ethnic groups in the community. So, from that respect, some positive things happened for the community of Holland.
LW: Let's back up a little bit, tell me a little bit about what it was like to grow up in Imlay City, more generally, and also as a Hispanic growing up in that community.

AR: Having grown up in Imlay City, it's a very small community. It was probably fifteen hundred people when I was a young man, and it's probably at two thousand, or twenty-six hundred people now, so it has grown a little bit, but it was a very close community. There were few Hispanic families in the immediate Imlay City area, our family being one, and another family by the same last name, not related whatsoever, were really the two principal Hispanic families in the community. We grew up in the community, were part of the community, were part of the school activities and the community activities, so we felt very assimilated in the community, it was a comfortable experience for me. What else can I tell you about it?

LW: Had your parents been immigrants, or had they grown up there also?

AR: My parents, yes, they immigrated from Mexico, and they had lived in Imlay City for many years and had established...

LW: What was your father's profession?

AR: My father was a vegetable grower at a muck farm there, east of town, and he grew vegetables and sold them at the Eastern Michigan Market in Detroit for his employment.

LW: Had you experienced any overt or little more subtle discrimination issues during those years in Imlay City?

AR: No, I can't say that I have. In fact, Larry, I don't think that personally, from my end, I have never, fortunately, had that experience that I have blatantly seen or have
experienced discrimination towards me. So I guess I can’t respond to that in any kind of frame of reference because I just haven’t ever felt that. I do know that growing up in Imlay City and being in the schools, obviously they discourage the speaking of Spanish in school. Being at the younger end of my family, I was the third from the youngest, so by the time myself and my two younger brothers attended school, we were pretty bilingual; we spoke both languages quite fluently. So, I’ve always been able to move between both cultures very easily. So, it’s never really been an experience for me. I did experience, not myself personally, but I did observe some situations in Imlay City - for example in the early sixties, inter-racial dating was not something you saw everyday, and so there were some issues with inter-racial dating in our school. As I said, I was not directly affected by it, but I know of other individuals that did have difficulties with issues such as that. But, as I said, I grew up in Imlay City, so I really could not contrast it to anything else. When I came to Holland, again the biggest change was the Hispanic population here versus having come from a small town like Imlay City. That was an interesting perspective.

LW: As you interacted in the Hispanic community here in Holland when you moved here, what type of experiences were those more established residents having? When you moved here, do you remember things they would talk about, or issues that were pressing on them when you first came to town?

AR: I can’t say that because I really did not become very involved directly with the Hispanic organizations, and have not to this day, by choice. I just have not chosen to go that route, and so I really don’t have a sense of the inner, if you will, political
workings of particular Hispanic organizations that may be in Holland. There’s LAUP, and there’s another organization here, I can’t remember what the name of it is, so I’ve not really been tied to those. So I don’t know the dynamics behind the politics involved.

LW: What organizations have you been involved in?

AR: Basically, I’ve been involved in educational organizations: The National Association of Bilingual Educators, Michigan Association of Bilingual Educators. I’ve been involved with some state task force that have addressed specific issues, for example, Hispanic drop-out rate, and those kinds of issues that impact a greater cross, a broader spectrum of the Hispanic population, not one particular group. So, I have been involved with issues related to minority populations, but not targeted to one particular group, more a broad perspective on issues that impact. I said the drop-out rate, I’ve been on a state task force for migrant education, that’s my area of expertise, so in that sense, I’ve been involved with those kinds of organizations that have a bigger impact, if you will, and a bigger target group of minorities.

LW: Looking at the bigger picture, how have things changed in the twenty years that you’ve been involved in those types of issues?

AR: I think the kids have become much more sophisticated, the children’s aspirations have changed. They have bigger dreams, and I think they have the know-how of how to attain them. Now, whether some choose to do so or not, that’s another matter. I’ve observed the opportunities for minority children have grown a lot, expanded significantly. I think there is a host of programs out there that individuals can take
advantage of to ensure that they attain the goals that they may have set. The big change I think I’ve seen in kids has been their aspirations to do things that in the past perhaps were not realistic, or were not going to be attainable because of a variety of factors and barriers.

LW: What are some of the most significant changes you’ve seen in Holland in the last close to twenty years?

AR: It’s the growth, commercial and also the population growth, but specific to the population, I think the demographics of the population growth. Those two things have been just amazing to me. And, that’s just during the time span that I’ve been here. I think it’s extremely positive, I really do. I think it’s positive for the community that there is such diversity and such a healthy economy, and I don’t think the twenty years that I’ve been here, I’ve ever really read or heard about or experienced a depressive economic situation in Holland, in the immediate area, Holland-Grand Rapids.

LW: It’s pretty economically vibrant.

AR: Right, extremely so.

LW: Does the church play a significant role in your life?

AR: Absolutely, yes. We have been members of the United Methodist Church most of the time that we have been here. And, the church does, and I think the church in general, is reflective of what Holland is all about. I think the religious bed, whichever denomination you may be, I think is reflective of the Holland culture, the climate of the community. So, sure, religion plays a big part in my life, and the way
I conduct my daily activities.

LW: What kind of role do you think it has is played in Holland? You touched briefly on it, but if you were to look in the Holland community, what kinds of positive and maybe negative effects has the church had, that you have seen or observed?

AR: Again, I can only speak from the experience of the church that I have been involved with, which is the First United Methodist. I know that they have made great efforts, and I have been involved with some of the task force that they've had within the church setting, for outreach ministry to the minority population within its immediate area, and I know that there have been other churches that have jointly tried to do activities with other denominations in Holland who address issues of inclusiveness, for example, including minorities in their congregations and facilitating some kind of cross-cultural interaction with the established congregation and those from other ethnic minority groups. So I think the church, in that respect, has in general made overtures to address some of the issues - some more overtly than others, and some not so overtly. From what experience I have with the United Methodist Church, I know there has been a concerted effort to be inclusive in their congregation. I can't speak for some of the others, I do know a large segment of the population of Hispanic is Catholic, and so I know that St. Francis De Sales and Our Lady of the Lake also does some significant outreach and special projects in addressing social and economic issues for the minority population.

LW: I'd like to walk down the path of the migrant issues, if we could, because that's a specialty of yours. It's something where probably it is more difficult for us to talk to
individuals with that type of background in the scope of this project that we've been doing. Could you tell me a little about what are the issues in the migrant community, and maybe give me a little bit of history?

AR: Sure. By the way, I was also involved with migrant education in Alpena, so I've been in migrant ed since 1972. It has been my lifetime career that I've been in education, that I've been in one way or another been involved with the migrant population. Issues that they have as it relates to Holland?

LW: Yes. What kinds of experiences have they had? I've talked to individuals who have talked about some of the housing arrangements that are less than desirable, those kinds of challenges.

AR: Obviously housing has been an issue with people other than migrant people. When my family came here, it was extremely limited. That is one of the ironic things, that when I did come into Holland and decided to search for a home, we in fact were tracked, what they call the Middle Mexico belt, which is between First street and maybe Sixteenth/Eighteenth street, and surprisingly, out of choice that I made, we chose to live on Sixteenth street where we bought a home when we first came in. So in that respect, I learned later that perhaps that was, I have not been in the house-buying business for a while now, but I do know that I learned later in conversation with others that in fact, x-street and x-street were considered the Middle Mexico belt, if you will, and it's ironic that we ended up in that particular geographic area of Holland.

LW: But you didn't probably realize it at the time?
AR: No, at the time I did not. We looked at some other factors. So, it was a good experience and an eye-opening experience in terms of those kinds of subtle... I guess in that respect, I felt, in retrospect, a little betrayed by the realtor who steered us in that particular area, not that it damaged me in any way, shape, or form. It's just the principle behind the matter.

LW: Did you run into that at all when you moved to north side?

AR: Not at all, no. But I just found it ironic that I found it out after we had purchased a home and had been living there. That in fact we were tracked there, supposedly. And that was alright.

LW: You probably would have run into that even more probably ten years earlier in Holland.

AR: Yes, you would. So, that was interesting in that respect. In terms of the migrant families, housing has always been a real issue. Housing, there has always been an issue for the families, as far as the understanding that I have. There has not been any outward overtures from the community to embrace the migrant population. They pretty much insulate themselves from the Holland community, and the Holland community as such - at least as far as I know - has not made any efforts to break ground in including the families as a contributing factor to the community, which they are because they do a tremendous amount of good for the community in terms of the work that they do here and the money that they leave here, and their grocery stores, and their clothing stores, etc. Most of the families that I've worked with actually spend more time in Holland, Michigan, than they do in their home-base state of
Texas. Most of the families in the West Ottawa Schools are migrants that are contracted by the large Zelenka industry employer. So, they’re here a good six or seven months out of the year and spend four, at the maximum months, in Texas. In that sense, they’re really more of a member of the Holland community than perhaps they would like to think, and maybe Holland would like to recognize. From the family’s end of it, there is a sense of tolerance toward that attitude from Holland - that they’re not embraced as part of the community.

LW: What do you think are the causes for that isolation?

AR: Again, it’s a sense of, number one, the families are here to work. They do work very long hours. Oftentimes the only times they have interaction with the Holland community is either in the grocery stores or at the department stores at the mall, or in the banks. And so, there is that...and I’ve heard a lot of stereotypical comments and observations made by others in terms of the attire of the families and the types of vehicles that they drive. And they do, so it’s a lack of Holland’s understanding, the Holland community, the established community, a lack of understanding of why these families have the types of vehicles that they have, for example. They’re functional vehicles. They travel in them, they pack their house goods with them - so it’s a moving home. Their attire is obviously representative of whom they are. They come from Texas, which actually is a Mexican state, and their roots are there. So, from that respect, the sense I get at least from the families is that they have one up on the Holland community because they understand that their isolation or their insulation from the Holland community is a choice that they’ve made, but by the same token,
they also realize that Holland in no way has made any overtures to be inclusive of them. The welcome wagon does not go out to the camps to welcome them when they’re back, when they return and when they leave. Where they do, perhaps, in some of the other geographic areas. So, those kinds of issues are out there with the families as well. Once they establish a particular sense of comfort with an institution, they’ll be loyal to a business. And yet, some of the businesses have not been responsive to the particular needs of the families. For example, language, having people who speak the language of the families. Even at major grocery stores or department stores, there really aren’t people there that can help the families who aren’t English speaking. It’s just a whole gamut of little dynamics that after being here for a while, you do pick up on those things. And, I said, I can’t directly relate to them, other than the situation when I bought my home, like I said, but that was an afterthought that that in fact had happened. But, I was very pleased with our experience on Sixteenth street. It was very good for my children, myself, and my wife to get a sense of what the inner city is all about.

LW: Do you feel that there is at this point any exploitation on the part of the employers in Holland relative to their migrant employees?

AR: No, there are too many safeguards now for that to happen. I know personally, the largest employer, at least that I interact with, is Zelenka Nursery because that’s where most of our families whose children we serve in our district are employed by. I work very closely with the Human Resource Director, and I know that they take care of their families quite well in terms of housing and providing them secure employment
and whatnot. That happens. Sure, there are some of the blueberry farms that perhaps is sub-standard housing. Again, it is seasonal housing, it’s short-term housing, it is not intended to be anything more or anything less. In terms of exploiting families, I really can’t say that I have knowledge of that happening.

LW: Was there any of that in the past, maybe twenty years ago when you first worked with people in the Holland area that you witnessed or observed?

AR: Well, you know the pendulum and the swing is back and forth, now with the new immigration law. There was a time, yes, where the politics of immigration go in cycles. At one point, the border patrol was doing all kinds of crazy things in terms of stopping people based on their skin color and the vehicle that they were driving, and that’s happened not too long ago. It’s a matter of two to three years ago, that was still happening when the border patrol was stationed here at River Avenue. I can’t speak very specific to that, I just know that I’m very intimately knowledgeable of the families that are employed by Zelenka which are the two large housing complexes, and I am somewhat knowledgeable of some of the blueberry farm growers. No, I can’t say that I’ve seen that perpetuated.

LW: Tell me about the strengths that the migrant community brings to the community. What are they? What do they bring to the place? And what should the community be looking for?

AR: Well, number one, a tremendous work ethic. They really do have a very strong work ethic. They come here, they come to work, and in some families, their whole focus is around their work and their families. They are extremely close-knit families. It’s
not like our nuclear family, they have the extended family dynamics within their make-up, and so they are very close-knit. They support one another. It’s a support system that encourages that collectivism, if you will. And sometimes that is misconstrued by the community at large because they don’t understand the dynamics behind that, that even in our schools, our children tend to hang around together. It’s not a gang or intended to intimidate anybody, but it’s a security system for them. It’s a closeness that allows them a sense of comfort, being together with their own group of kids. And again, language is another reason that they cling to each other.

LW: Do you think that’s often misinterpreted?

AR: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, no doubt. Again, as I said, the family is very close. They do a lot together, and so you often times see them at the malls and at the grocery stores, and the banks in large numbers or big groups, and that’s by necessity, one, and by choice, because of the support system that they lend one another. It can be intimidating to people who don’t understand the dynamics behind the appearances or the actions.

LW: Where are most of the migrants coming from? Are they coming from the same geographic area?

AR: The majority of the families come to us from central and southern Texas. During the summer, we get a large population from Florida, and there again, those families are basically here to harvest the blueberry crops. So they are short term families, while our Zelenka family, many of their children are still in our schools. They’ll be gone in a week or two, and then they’ll be back mid-February. And so they’re here for
What kinds of challenges do you face as a person involved in education?

Well, one of the biggest challenges is being able to provide the children, as well as the teachers in our system, a support system to have a smooth transition when the children come, and also when they leave our schools. We provide a support system to children in the schools which is anywhere from tutorial work to reinforcing what happens in the classroom. There are general ed classrooms for children. So my staff, and that is throughout the district, their challenge is to try to get the children caught up, oftentimes because of the fragmentation of the instruction. What they’re being presented in Texas may be very different, and likely is, than what is being presented in our curriculum, and so there is a lot of fragmentation in their instruction. There are always pieces missing in the child’s instructional life, and so we try to fill those voids or those gaps, so that the kids are successful in the mainstream. Our whole focus is to get them out in the mainstream, not to have to pull them from the mainstream to provide this service. So, when at all possible, we work in the general ed program classrooms to provide support-help to the kids, and also indirectly to the teachers because of the language barrier for some of the families. We’re finding that in the last three or four years we’ve gotten many families directly from Mexico, which means high-need language support services. So, that’s the challenge that we have, making sure that the children are not falling between the cracks, and that our curriculum is able to respond to their very unique needs.

Do you do things in the classroom that celebrate the contributions of their families?
AR: It varies in each of the buildings. But, yes, for example, in this building the migrant teacher for example, intentionally has provided a tutorial program after school and she’s involved with fifth-grade students as a community service from this building to work with individual migrant children, reading to them and helping them with their homework. It serves two purposes, number one, they can model English as it should be, and secondly, it also allows these children, that do not have a whole lot of interaction with the migrant stream to come to know the children personally, on a one-to-one basis or a two-to-one ratio, perhaps. I think they had probably twenty-five kids that they were working with, targeting with different migrant children after school. This was the first activity that they’ve done this fall, and they’re going to do it again in the spring because it was so successful. We had mothers that were volunteering, that assist with the project.

LW: Are migrant children in the rest of the normal classrooms? Are they in a separate classroom?

AR: No, they’re in the mainstream. That’s an example of one the ways that we’re trying to change the mindset for kids to have an opportunity to...well, this is one of two buildings in which we have migrant children, Waukazoo and then Lakeshore. It is, I think, going on our seventh year here. We artificially brought the migrant children from the Quincy housing complex here to this building by decision of the superintendent to integrate the Waukazoo children with children that ordinarily would not have any interaction other than, perhaps out in the community, in the stores and whatnot, and then it’s very superficial. So, I think it was an excellent experiment in
social dynamics because it has been real positive, both for the Waukazoo community as well as for the migrant student population to be exposed to these children, the other children, the community children.

LW: It sounds like it would be. Shifting from migrant issues, tell me if you have any thoughts on this, how the role of women has changed in Holland in the twenty years that you've been here, or has it not changed in the time?

AR: Boy, I don't know how to respond to that. I don't know if I can. I guess I've not had a reason to watch for that, to see how that has developed.

LW: If thoughts come up, we can always come back to that. Recently, Holland was recognized as one of ten All-American cities. What qualities do you think earned Holland that honor?

AR: I don't know, to be very honest with you. I've read the articles like everybody else, but I don't know what the criteria was.

LW: What I am trying to get at is, what do you think the strengths of the community are?

AR: Personally, I think the strengths of the Holland community are the strong influence that the church has on the community and the attitudes of the people that live here. But again, I go back to the demographics. I think the make-up of the Holland community in terms of its population has actually been a plus in that respect. I guess those two factors stand out in my mind in terms of what would make Holland an All-American city. I'm not so sure that's the criteria that was used through to select it as such.

LW: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland?
AR: Well, disturbingly, I've observed the conflict between the ethnic minority - specific to the gangs, the Hispanic gangs and the Asian gangs, and the increase in violent crime has been something that I have been somewhat dismayed with. And, again, I know that comes with growth, and I also know that comes with transplant - people coming in with other values and other experiences, that's part of growing and developing into the type of large community that Holland is now. Through the years, I know there has been some infighting, or conflict, within the minority groups, specifically the Hispanic groups within Holland, in terms of one getting the upper hand on the other. I think of the LAUP yearly event with the queens. I know there have been controversies with that. But basically I think the conflict between the minority groups, the Hispanic gangs and Asian groups, has been troubling for me personally.

LW: Has it had a lot of effect on the school systems?

AR: It has had some certainly, but I think the schools nipped that on the bud real quick in terms of putting into place some very specific things about zero tolerance on any kind of gang activities. I know West Ottawa has a policy on that and I know Holland Public does as well. It is very limited, although it was an issue not too many years ago there were some things happening in the schools that were really quite disturbing. And it's because we have not felt the need to have those types of policies in place. I think that has calmed down, and I think it's been resolved because of the more active response of the districts to those very issues. Obviously we have new issues coming forth all the time in terms of hot buttons, if you will, in terms of some things that are developing. As you get larger populations and needs for specific services
sometimes, you don’t satisfy the needs of everyone. So there’s reactionary responses to certain issues that you have to address. The gang issue is one where West Ottawa and Holland both did very well in responding to in a very direct and intentional way.

LW: What kinds of things were they seeing before those types of policies?

AR: We had graffiti in some of the buildings, and we had kids trying to wear attire that was very much associated with gangs and those kinds of issues. We had a few incidences with weapons being brought to school, and that has almost disappeared. It is a very rare occurrence. But there was a period when all that was going on, and I think a lot of it had to do with the gang activity in the central part of Holland, which I have not read a whole lot about. Again, you read the paper with some skepticism and you draw...

LW: Considering how young some of the reporters are and how new they are to town, it’s probably a wise thing to do.

AR: So, those are some of the things that I’ve observed. As I said, I related to a growing community and people coming from other areas that perhaps don’t hold the same values that you and I do. I’m not trying to be judgmental, but I think those are the dynamics that cause that kind of thing to happen.

LW: Do you think there is a perceivable generation gap in Holland at all?

AR: I know there is in the Asian community - we’re dealing with in West Ottawa now. We have Asian children now that are probably second and third generation here in Holland, and because they, meaning the Asian community and the Hispanic community, are much alike in the fact that they also have an extended family system,
not a nuclear family, so there are some cross-generational issues amongst the kids and grandparents and aunts and uncles that may live within the same home. Because the kids are Americanized, they’re assimilated, and they have different ideas than what the different generations bring in, in the way they perceive the world and how they perceive the way things should be. So there’s conflict, inter-generational conflict. At least I know in the Asian community, I don’t know and can’t speak right now to the Hispanic, again I’m just relating to those that I have interaction with in the schools in terms of some of the issues that our counselors and some of our administrators are dealing with. I know that is an issue with the Asian community... (end of side one)

LW: Could you describe for me a significant turning point in your life?

AR: Not really, my life has been pretty constant. I’ve been in education all my career life. I’ve been with the same woman for twenty-six years, and our children are happy, and I think well adjusted, trying to attain their goals and aspirations. I really can’t personally speak to anything that stands out in my life in terms of turning points.

LW: What are your aspirations for the future?

AR: For the future, I plan to play a lot of golf and tennis and retire in the very near future. Probably want to be a snow bird, and go somewhere where it’s warm, and have my home here as well - have the best of both worlds.

LW: Has there been anyone that has been important, who has really influenced your life, not speaking of your wife, you may, but I was wondering if there was someone, a role model or anyone who has just really influenced you?
AR: I would have to say my parents because I come from a family of seventeen children, and I’m the third from the youngest. Watching them, they work very hard to provide for their family, and I think they did an admirable job.

LW: What was it like to grow up in a family of seventeen children?

AR: For me it was a real wonderful experience. Most of the girls came before the boys, believe it or not, all of the girls were pretty much raised and gone, and then we had eight of the boys, starting from the two twins, that are younger than I, to the eighth boy, all grew up together. We were a very close family in that respect. We looked out for each other and supported one another. Perhaps that’s unusual. In that respect, I’m unique in that I’ve had the blessing of being able to be raised with a baseball team, if you will. We entertained ourselves a lot in sports - all my brothers and I were very athletic and continue to be to this day. So, I had a really positive childhood, in terms of being around so many people and having such a support system.

LW: That’s wonderful. What are your thoughts on bilingualism in the school system?

AR: Another area of my responsibility - I direct the bilingual programs as well. I think it’s misunderstood by people, what it’s all about. Bilingual education in a nutshell, what it is, is using the child’s dominant language to get him from point A to point B. That is to make him or her able to be successful in an English-functioning society. Bilingual education is not maintaining one’s culture. It’s not promoting one culture over another. It is a methodology. You use the language that is most expedient to that child for understanding a concept and moving on to the next concept or to the
next level of academic success. I think a lot of people misunderstand that. Bilingual education has had a real bum rap right from the get-go. It has been a real controversial program because I think people don’t understand the premise behind the program. The whole premise behind the program is to provide children a support system in the native language so they can move from that system to the system they need to function in and be successful, which is English. So, it’s just bringing them from point A to point B, and it’s using the child’s language. It’s like a tool, like any other tool that we use in educating our children. It’s like a computer or a remedial reading class that you use to correct a weakness that a child has in a particular area. The language is simply...the language is by no means a weakness, it’s simply a different mode of communication. So the essence of bilingual education is that. It’s to make that transition from the native language, which is not English, to the societal-functioning language of English. That’s all it is. It’s not promoting political agendas of any sort. That’s a misunderstanding that has never been...It has been used as a political issue, and so people misunderstand. Misinformation has gotten into the wrong hands, and people just don’t understand what it’s all about. My staff here in our district, again, we have assistants that are Cambodian that are Laotian and Vietnamese, and again, when at all possible, and Spanish speaking as well, they speak English with the children. But, if a child is not understanding something, you can speak till the cows come home, and they’re still not going to understand it. Then they move to the native language mode, so the child understands what it is they are trying to convey, or what it is that happened in the classroom in terms of instruction
from the teacher and what the teacher wants, then they move on. They do the work, and if they give evidence of understanding the concepts, then they move on to the next one. Hopefully it can be done in English, and if not, we would revert to the native language because they have that gift that they can share with that child.

LW: It's been under fire. Do you see that changing at all?

AR: I don't know. I don't see it changing because, as I said, I think it is a political move by some people, and it is more political in different geographic areas. I know California, for example, is the mecca of the English-only movement because of the fact that they are so close to the Mexican border, and they do get a lot of illegals and legals into their particular school districts and into their welfare system. And, it is draining, I have no doubt about it. But we're in the educating business, and we don't deal with the issues of immigration and whatnot. We don't ask families if they are documented or not. If their children are here, it's our charge to provide an education. West Ottawa has always been very supportive of both the migrant and bilingual program, both in dollars and in principle. So, our charge here is that when we get children in the building, we provide them with an equitable education, and that is that we try to level the playing field for a large number of them. If that means providing support services in their language, then so be it, that's what we'll do. It's a very political hot potato. No, I don't think it will go away. In fact, we're coming to heads with, again, the affirmative action thing and now the English-only piece. All of that was defeated here in Michigan not too many years ago, the English-only move. What is the essence of it, I guess? Why wouldn't you want an educated
driver out there? Why would you want to deny someone a license because he or she is able to answer the questions in a language other than English? Is not the knowledge the same? It’s getting to the end results - do you understand the principles, the rules of the road? To me, it’s a real political thing, and no, I don’t think it will go away. I think you’ll always have those individuals that feel that the system is being abused by these types of programs. I just can’t imagine the thinking behind it.

LW: Affirmative action has been under fire and under attack in certain areas of California, for example? What are your thoughts on that?

AR: Again, I think that there are some extreme situations. I think that there are situations where you can actually point the finger and say this is a new reverse discrimination issue. Although, from my very small world in terms of the knowledge that I have of affirmative action, I do know that in West Michigan, for example, and in the area of construction, minority construction companies have gotten short-changed on getting federal dollars for projects that ordinarily would go to other than themselves if that kind of a program were not in place. It’s a very hard thing to argue against, or for, because I think that you can make a case either way for it, and yet I can see some very strong benefits for it, and yet I can see it where it could be abused by some individuals. But I do know, from what little bit I have talked to some people in the area in terms of businesses entrepreneurs, that without that plan, they would not have access to resources, dollars, and access to federal dollars that fund projects, if you will. I speak specifically to the construction business. I know that there have been
issues with that. So, from that perspective, I think, now I’m not trying to speak out of both ends of my mouth, but I am, because I think there are some very positive things with affirmative action, and yet I can see the flip side of the coin, where there have been situations, and there probably will be, where it’s abused. It does question whether it is reverse discrimination or not on individuals. It’s hard.

LW: How do you feel about the political representation, especially for the minority community in Holland?

AR: In Holland, I think it’s next to nil. I can name two people, I guess who are any kind of political figures. Now again, whether it’s by choice, I’m not sure, that we have such small representation. Or is it the system? Is there something in the system that does not allow that to happen, whether it is by design or not?

LW: I know in the city, and this is probably prior to your arrival, but the city used to run on an at-large system for the entire city council. In more modern, recent times, it has been by ward, which has at least opened up some opportunities. I don’t know when that change was made.

AR: Well, I don’t know. I know the changes were made when I was here. I read some of the issues that were being presented in terms of trying to address that very issue and having more representatives of the population itself. Right now, I don’t see a whole lot of minorities in boards and whatnot. Why that is, I don’t know.

LW: Do you see, from your point of view, a lot of opportunity at the upper echelon in the corporate environment for minorities, or is there a glass ceiling?

AR: That I don’t know. I couldn’t even speak to that because that’s out of my realm of
LW: You mentioned you had a daughter at Hope College. In your point of view, what kind of role does Hope play in the community?

AR: I think Hope College is certainly a plus for the community. There’s no question about it. An institution of the calibre of Hope College, but I think Hope is struggling with its own issues on diversity and opening the opportunities for...not only opening the opportunities, in theory the opportunity is there for anybody to attend Hope College. The reality is that there isn’t a system at Hope to support, once you get a minority student there, to be successful. Again, the student demographics at Hope, you’ll find there are not that many minority children there. I’m somewhat familiar with the educational happenings at Hope, and I know they’ve made a lot of effort to establish a multicultural, friendly environment there, and they’ve failed on several occasions. It’s not enough to get the kids into the institution; there has to be a system of support there for them. I think Hope is trying to get it right.

LW: From your point of view, what things could be done that would help to provide a level of support?

AR: As I said, I think Hope is doing some. At least the little bit I know about Hope, they’re trying to do it right. They are trying to get it right, because they’ve tried several things. They’ve had several multicultural coordinators or directors, a couple African-Americans who either felt frustrated or just couldn’t do it, didn’t have the particular skills to carry it off. What could Hope do? Well, continue to have programs like that. I think they have to do more outreach with the students within
their dominant student population to educate them and sensitize them to others not of their culture. But, no, Hope is certainly a positive for the community, there is no doubt about it. As I said, they’re trying to get it right, and that’s good. I don’t think they’re there by a long shot. I hope that they continue to make an effort to attract minorities into the school and to expose more of their students to other cultures and other individuals not of Dutch background or make them more homogenized, if you will.

LW: Has your daughter had a good experience?

AR: Yes, Vanessa’s an extremely competent young lady, and very bright. I think she’s a lot like myself. She has a capacity to cross over to either culture very easily. She was born and raised here in Holland, so she understands the operatus of the society and how to deal with diversity.

LW: What are your thoughts on Tulip Time?

AR: Great. I’ve been to one Tulip Time.

LW: Otherwise you stay on the north side?

AR: I stay out of the way and let the tourists...It’s all right I guess.

LW: In recent years there has been some tension or competition relative to the fiesta, which we mentioned earlier in Tulip Time, coinciding in time.

AR: I’ve heard throughout the years, as the children march in the Childrens Parade, I’ve heard rumbling that it’s not representative of the Dutch community because there is such a diverse group of kids marching. From that respect, I think it’s good for Holland to visually be represented of the make-up of its community, whether it’s the
children's parade or the street scrubbing, etc. Whatever activity is taking place associated with Tulip Time, whether by force or by choice. I think that’s one way, an indirect way, for Holland to present its diversity, whether people agree with it or not, whether that’s the vehicle by which to do it. You mentioned the issue of the LAUP celebration, the Tulip Time activity somewhat coinciding, colliding, if you will. To me, I see some benefits out of those kinds of issues because it causes people to think and to speak and to address the fundamental issues of the event and its ramifications on others, since it a LAUP celebration. I think those kinds of things cause us to be more attuned to having to co-exist in a multi-culture kind of perspective because Holland is changed forever. Holland is not Dutch. It is a conglomeration of many ethnic groups now, and I don’t think that will ever change. It can’t, how can it? So, from that respect, I see positives out of that. I guess, reflecting on what we’ve talked about today in a whole different direction, but the only thing that I see as a negative has been the issue of gangs, and again, the increase in violent crime. And as I said, that goes with the turf in terms of growth.

LW: Is it your sense, when those types of issues are discussed or highlighted in the media or elsewhere, that there tends to be more focus than there needs to be on the ethnic background of individuals?

AR: Well, it’s always there, Larry. The example with the half-mast flag with the mayor. You know, as sincere as he was about what he did and why he did it, those are the kinds of subtle issues that are still there that flare up because someone was trying to do something positive without ever...I know Al McGeehan very well, and I know he
would never have done that and cause what it did cause as an issue of discrimination or prejudice or however they were charging it. But those issues are always there, underlying, and it's based on historical happenings. Like I said, I know Al McGeehan, and I know his intention was not to offend anyone, and yet it did, and legitimately so. I think those folks had a good argument as to why would you do it for one and not for another. And then the veteran's association got into it to mix in the fray, and why you should and shouldn't do. Racial issues will always be there, either floating on the surface or below it, and it's just going to take a certain prick, if you will, for it to show its ugly face. And that was a good example to me of something that went very wrong, and the intentions were very good. And, so, if anything, that's a good example, Larry, of the underlying current. I think more and more are leaders in the community, because there isn't enough...you touched on the representation of minorities in the political system in Holland. I think our community leaders have to be very cognizant of, and have to be observant of that issue at all times. I go back to the Luciano Hernandez and the commissioner's issue, as friendly as that may have been an issue, or a non-issue, if you will, it's not. It's always there, so I think more and more if we don't get more minority representation in the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Clubs and City Council, those kinds of things are going to continue to appear because people are not sensitive. Someone is not saying to them, "Look, if you do that this is going to happen." I'm not trying to second guess the mayor, I don't know whether he had gone through the Council or if it was something that he decided to do without getting some kind of feedback, or
whether Luciano would have even brought that up as an issue or not. I don’t know, but I’m just saying there will always be that issue of race within, depending on the context of which something occurs, and again, right or wrong, I don’t know. I just know that Holland, particularly because of its large minority population, the people that are the shakers and movers need to be attuned to that. I think the flag thing was just a good example of something that was not meant to come out the way it did, and it’s really unfortunate.

LW: I think it surprised the mayor, considerably.

AR: Oh, yes, I think he was aghast that he was charged with a prejudicial action.

LW: It was probably a relatively quick decision, which isn’t always the best approach.

AR: Not always the best.

LW: Any other issues, or things you’d like to say?

AR: I must be boring, because my life has been pretty stable. I try to stay neutral on a lot of issues, and I have never intentionally gotten involved with the Hispanic politics in Holland, as small as they may be. That’s just not my forte.

LW: Although, I think the LAUP was the organizations that nominated your name - I’m pretty sure, I may be wrong on that, but as we went forward in the oral history project, identifying individuals we should talk to.

AR: Oh, really.

LW: They are the ones who put your name forward, I think. I don’t want to swear on a Bible, but…

AR: That could be. I know Tino very well. Tino and I when I first came here, he was
very helpful to me, and I respect him quite a lot.

LW: That’s a challenge that we’ve had. Of course, personally I have two As in my last name and I look very Dutch, but as we at the Archives have tried to collect material relating to the Hispanic community or the migrant experience, it has been very difficult to even just get the connections that are needed.

AR: Yes, well, Larry, and I don’t know how many other people you may have asked before me and said, "no, thanks." But, see that’s where we, meaning the Hispanic community or the Asian community, we need to do these things. We need to talk to people like you. It would have been easy for me to say, "No, I can’t, I’m busy," and just not to do it, and I would have been remiss not to. Again, I don’t know how many other people you may have approached and they said no, for whatever the reason may be. We’ve got to be doing these things. We’ve got to be talking to people such as yourself.

LW: We find it at least with the oral history project, it is the most difficult in the Asian-American community because I think culturally, there is more suspicion of individuals outside their group, and especially those with perceived authority and how it might be misused or perceptions...

AR: Have you talked to any?

LW: Very few. It has been very difficult even to identify individuals to approach. So, if you have suggestions, I surely would love to hear them.

AR: Oh, yes. I’ve got a couple of people I would love to have you talk to. In fact, we’re trying to get them involved in our school. Some of these people are incredible.
They’re just unreal. One of them, the name was given to me, he was an army general, in Laos.

LW: Well, if you could jot down their names and an address or a phone number, we’ll do the same process of sending a letter.

AR: I’ll do that...Take one of my cards, and if nothing else, you might want one of my assistants. You might know Thongwan Champassak has just a great history behind her as well. She lives in Holland, in the city on Sixteenth street, and she would be a good person to talk with as well because she would have a sense, because she does a lot of liaison’s work for the schools for us, and she has done it for many agencies in town, the courts and whatnot. She is one of my assistants. She would be an excellent person to do this with. (Give names and phone numbers of several people) Those would be excellent contacts to give you good representation of the Asian community.

LW: I’ll contact all five of them. Another thing that I’d really like to do is - I know that this was a deficit for us, it’s been a big deficit - we were approached by one of the local television stations for a photograph of a migrant worker, just any photograph. And we went through the entire archival collection, and we have thousands of photographs, and I did not have an adequate photograph...

AR: I’ll tell you where you can get an excellent...she has them on the walls...and that is Monica Giddy. Check with Monica, you know the pastor, Fierro, he did the photos, and they have them in the office on Sixteenth street, Holland Public Schools administration office. They’re in Monica’s office; she would be absolutely be glad to
loan you a copy. They're wonderfully done. He did some good photos with families out in the fields.

LW: Have you assembled a lot of papers over the course of your career, working in schools and so on? I'm now talking professionally.

AR: In what respect?

LW: Documents, writings you may have done, or correspondence that you've had over the years, or reports that you've just collected over the course of doing what you do with bilingual education? I'd be very interested in those kinds of things for the Archives to sort of document your expertise.

AR: I do have, in fact, I have quite an extensive report on the drop-out, the task force that I worked with on the state, factors affecting drop-outs from the Hispanic community, and it delves with the whole gamut. The migrant stream, the issue of the genders, why girls, proportionally higher drop-out rate for girls in the Hispanic community. That is very obvious to us, the parents expect them to be married and be taken care of. That's the mind set. That type of report?

LW: When we're talking about an individual's personal papers, it can mean a lot of different things that are a part of that. With some people there's quite a bit of correspondence, sometimes it's a lot of reports, sometimes it a personal reflection, some people keep a diary, photographs of their years in their career working in various areas. When you get ready to retire, you said that may happen in the next few years and get ready to clean this office out, those things that aren't required by the school to be retained - we would love to have some of that for the Archives.
Please keep us in mind. Thank you for spending time with me today, I appreciate that. We covered a lot.

AR: Well, sure. I hope you find it beneficial.

LW: Oh, it definitely has been. We've covered a lot of very significant issues, in a very thoughtful manner. And you've given me a lot of good leads on individuals.

AR: I'm excited about you contacting those individuals because they can give you a good sense of the Asian experience.