Rios, Al Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Repository citation: Wagenaar, Larry, "Rios, Al Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years""
http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/ses_holland/108
Oral History Interview with
Al Rios

(unedited)

Conducted December 10, 1997
by Larry Wagenaar

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
LW: Let me start by having you state your full name, and date and place of birth.

AR: My full name is Albino Rios. I'm a junior. I don't have a middle name, but my birth certificate has my mom's middle name, Albino Herrera Rios. My birthday is [date removed], 1961, and I was born in Juarez, Mexico, which is in the state of Chihuahua.

LW: You and I are of similar ages. I was born in '62--the following June. You probably don't have any memories of growing up. You only spent two years in Mexico?

AR: Yeah, a couple years--two, three years there. My dad pretty much traveled throughout the US as a migrant labor worker. Spent time here in the Michigan area--Bay City and other parts up north; California, because I have a sister who was born in Woodland, California; parts of Texas, New Mexico, Colorado. And we moved...My dad's brother first moved to Zeeland. I don't know how he came upon Zeeland and found a job and a home and told my dad. So then eventually we made our way to Zeeland and lived with them, my dad's brother's family, for a little while, settling in Zeeland.

LW: Tell me about your early memories as a child in a migrant family in Zeeland.

AR: I know we were one of the few minority families in Zeeland. Growing up in Zeeland was...Even though people ask me, "Where did you grow up?" "Holland-Zeeland." I never had contact with Holland until I got hired here as a police cadet. So the only
time that I would ever spend in Holland throughout my upbringing would be when my
dad in my younger years would bring me over to Holland to some guy's house to get
my hair cut or the grocery store. Otherwise I never had any contacts with Holland
what so ever, even during my high school years once I began driving with my friends
because all my friends were from Zeeland. Grew up in Zeeland, and again, it was an
experience because I didn't speak English. When we moved to Zeeland, we lived
with my dad's brother for a little bit and then we did move to Holland for about a
semester. We lived right here on Columbia across from Lincoln School. I went there
for a semester, and then we went back to Zeeland and lived downtown above a store.
I didn't speak English, and so I went to kindergarten in Lincoln School there and I
was in kindergarten for two and a half years!

LW: Two and a half years.

AR: A semester here and then two years there.

LW: So they kept you in kindergarten to try to give you the English language?

AR: That, and I was having a hard time adjusting because it was pretty much an all Anglo
school. I had some hard times during my elementary years adjusting because of that
and being pretty much the only Hispanic in the whole school. I remember getting in
problems, fights and what not.

LW: Tell me about some of the experiences.

AR: Just getting picked on! Being "different," and people just not being exposed that
much to someone who was a minority. As I grew up, pretty much the only problems
I had because I was different was during my elementary years, because once I got into
junior high I didn’t have those problems anymore and nobody looked at me as anything other than just like them. The same thing carried on into my high school years. I never thought of myself as being any different until I got out of college and moved here is when I started becoming aware of my difference. I don’t know if it sounds weird, but it’s different because all my friends were Anglo everywhere I went. Nobody looked at me and treated me any different. I was just like one of the guys, one of my buddies. And it was the same thing, that culture shock like my first experience to a different culture, then from there into I got into college. You know how some Anglos feel different around Hispanics or African-Americans or Asians because they don’t understand the culture and they never had contact with that minority group. That’s what I am assuming happened during my early years in Zeeland. It was different, and I was treated different but I never really realized that. And that’s what caused some of the problems. Then not speaking the language caused some problems.

LW: Did your family in Zeeland experience discriminatory or difficult situations?

AR: I don’t think so. I know we were not the first Hispanics in Zeeland. I’m pretty sure we weren’t. But we were one of the few. I was raised the majority of my life in that downtown area. That’s where I lived the majority of my life. Right there. I didn’t move. We lived above the store downtown, and when we finally settled in a house, we moved just down from there, down from Van Raalte Restaurant. Then they tore that house down. And then we moved a block over on Cherry and Church Street and that’s where I lived until I moved out. But I never saw our family being treated
differently. We were taken under by a beautiful family that really took interest in us and tried to integrate us into the community. It was tough because my mom and dad never really got involved in anything, as much as they tried to do for my mom and dad, just because they just weren't comfortable. They never really spoke the English language a whole lot. They didn't feel comfortable being around that atmosphere where they were the only Hispanics, so they never got involved in a whole lot of anything, church or whatever.

LW: Are your parents still living?

AR: Yes. They moved to Holland and live in the Lincoln Estate Trailer Park on the south side.

LW: Your parents' names?

AR: My dad's name is Albino and my mom's is Dominquila. I'm glad I was raised in Zeeland.

LW: Tell me why.

AR: This might sound weird, but it's just my feelings and from seeing. I don't want you to get me wrong. I'm proud of my race. I'm proud of being Mexican. I'm proud of my culture and I do practice it. But ever since I moved to Holland and in this job and dealing with Hispanic people and the youth, and I'm not saying they're all that way but I don't know, it's just...I tell my wife I'd like to see my children raised kind of the way I was, and like I said, I'm not saying and I don't think I'm any better than any one else. It's just that I feel that there's more of a chance of them if they're raised in a school setting where there's a lot of Hispanics that they're more likely to
be drawn into a bad influence. I don't know if it makes sense. I guess you got to be the minority and understand that and see it. I feel that if they would attend the public school here, that they'll get drawn...that some of the influence among the Hispanic is not good, and it seems like they have a strong influence on their own to draw them in and I don't want that to happen to my kids. I was raised in an all Anglo school and I enjoyed it. There's a bad element in any and whatever group, race. But you got to understand the Hispanic culture to maybe understand a little bit of what I'm saying.

LW: What's unique about the Hispanic culture that you think causes that or lends that to happen? Or is it the dominant culture that sort of drives that?

AR: For example, not so much here like in other states where there are vast amounts of Hispanic groups and this gang issue thing where some of it is generation carried on and so it's in the blood to be involved or get involved with it because...I had this one kid that I was talking to that was an informant and we got to talking, "Hey, what's going on, Rios?" I said, "What's happening, whatcha got goin'?" and this and that. He says, "Hey, man, I heard some stuff about you." "Oh yeah? What did you hear?" He says, "I hear you smoke and deal weed." I said, "Oh yeah? Huh...! And you believe it, don't ya?" He smiled and he said, "Man', he said, "that's okay, Rios, it's in our blood! In your blood! We're made down. We're Spanish!" What a comment to make. He's saying because I'm Spanish, I'm Mexican, that it's in my blood to use drugs and smoke? It's sad to hear that because they don't think much of our race then. They say it's in my blood to deal or use drugs. It's just weird. The Hispanic culture is just...It's great, like I said, don't get me wrong, I practice it a lot.
I love it. But it's more opportunity to really get drawn into the bad part of it. You have more broken families among minorities, Hispanics included, and more problems with alcohol and drugs...I mean that's what I'm seeing and what I've seen since I've been a police officer here for the past fifteen years. Divorce is high among Hispanics, but it's high among anybody.

LW: Do you think economic opportunity is there?

AR: Economic opportunities for Hispanics are not near there. Education isn't pushed as much. It wasn't pushed on me either when I was growing up. It wouldn't have mattered very much to my parents if I would have quit. Yes, they would mention that it was important and you should finish, but it wasn't really pushed on me or stressed a lot that I need to go to school. But like I said, God had me in His hands and took me down the right path or led me out of my troubles and got me on the straight and narrow. Thanks to the friends that I had, which were all friends that were all involved with sports and education, and I got involved with that. Even though I wasn't very intelligent book-wise, being around them made me realize that I'm smarter than what I've really shown in high school and I proved that once I got into college.

LW: I want to ask you a question about your children. How are you dealing with that issue as far as your own children are concerned?

AR: Like a said, I've talked with my wife and my wife says, "I understand where you're coming from and why you wouldn't want..." She grew up here in Holland, born in Texas in the Valley, grew up here and had a lot of Hispanic friends as well as non-
Hispanic and she said, "I understand exactly what you're saying and I can't blame you if that's the way you want to raise them. I'm with you and that's the way we'll raise our kids." And I'm not going to shelter them and keep them away having Spanish friends or anything. It's just that I'm really going to watch it close. Our kids attend the Catholic school right now and as long as I can keep affording it. They started at sixth grade and as long as they keep implementing more grades, I'll continue to send them there. Because to me there's going to be more of a chance that they will be successful than if I integrate them into the public school. There's more bad element in the public school. It's proven Holland Christian has their share of bad element. I mean we've dealt with it. I've dealt with it. But not near as much as you're likely to find in the public school.

LW: Is that simply because of the economic capacity of those who go there do you think?

AR: Yeah. I think that's part of it.

LW: The parents...

AR: Yep. That's in doing my part in talking with my kids. My older one is eight years old going on nine soon and my five year old will be six also in about three or four months. So talking with them and telling them--not hiding things from them but telling them. Why do I want to wait until they're fourteen or fifteen to start telling them about it? I tell them now when we're out together. I talk them about gangs or gang bangers or what's this or that. The other day I talked to my daughter. She told me she liked school. I told her, "I hope you say that when you're in high school because that's important, education is important and it's only going to get you places."
Otherwise you're going to be stuck like these kids out there that you call gang bangers. They don't have a life. They're heading in that direction because they want to get in trouble. They don't want to listen. They want to have this bad attitude. They don't like school. I tell my oldest that. She needs to hear that.

LW: Let's back up again. Tell me about going to Grand Rapids Junior College.

AR: I was fortunate. All my friends were...I call them egg-heads because they were bright individuals. In ninth grade they were already into biology and some of your tougher classes. Their junior year they were in calculus and physics and that. Me? I didn't have algebra until I was a senior in high school. That shows you where I was as far the school level there in high school...biology I didn't have until I was a senior. They'd already had all of those preparatory courses, college courses prepared. About my junior year is when I really started getting serious about high school. I was popular. I was involved with school sports and student government, but I just wasn't popular as far as grade-wise. Late junior year is when I started getting involved. I had one teacher in particular that really took a lot of interest in me and prepared me, guided me, towards the end of my senior year taking some of these...There was a PSAT test and an ACT, and preparing me and my parents. We didn't have the money and they didn't know anything about these forms. With this teacher's help she helped me, and I tell you it was a scary thing going to college because I didn't have the grades! JC was the only school that I could go to. If it would have been four years I would have stayed there because it was excellent. Again I started proving that I have the smarts to do it. At JC I was short probably five credits for my Associate in Arts,
so I went to Ferris and finished out a term there and transferred those and got my
two-year degree. Then I went to Grand Valley and finished out there. I did well. I
was real happy.

LW: Did you go into the police academy after the four years?

AR: After four years, yeah.

LW: What led you toward law enforcement?

AR: Well, actually I wanted to get into probation. I wanted to work with juveniles.

That's what I got my two-year degree in--juvenile justice. Then I kind of mixed it up
because I'd talked with one of our probation officers here who went to Zeeland High
School also that I kind of looked up to, and I kind of took his advice. He said, "You
know, if I had to do it all over again, I'd get into law enforcement first then get into
the probation." I got into law enforcement then. Went there one day and was aware
they had a cadet program. Went in there one day with Keith Houting and he told me
to come back the next day, and I was hired as a cadet! Then I finished out my two
years of college and then the academy and then they hired me shortly after.

LW: Did you know that you wanted to serve in the Holland Department?

AR: I was there already and I was well liked and said if they give me a job, they give me a
job, and I stayed there.

LW: Did you meet your wife while you were in college?

AR: No. I met her here while I was working. I guess I've been fortunate because I've
had a lot of success here, and I've never had to go through interviews for jobs or
boards and all that, other than internally for a promotion.
LW: Just walk me through briefly where you started and where you are.

AR: I started as a cadet and finished up as a cadet in our cadet program. Got hired as a full-time officer. I think I spent my first four years as just a general patrol officer. Driving around taking complaints, writing tickets, any investigations that I could do on my own--mainly you're out there driving around enforcing, protecting, serving, and taking complaints. A lot of the follow-up investigations are usually transferred to a different department. Then I did downtown foot patrol, a form of community policing, for a year. And then after that I went back to the road for a short period of time and the West Michigan Enforcement Team, a drug team opened up. I put in for a position and got into that, did two years as an undercover officer. Just prior to that getting into WMET, we started some form of community policing on a part-time basis assigned to a certain neighborhood. I did that just prior to getting into WMET. Then WMET two years and I got out of WMET, went back to the road for about nine months, and then we began community policing on a full-time basis. I did that for four years. Then just recently got promoted to detective sergeant.

LW: Tell me what kinds of things you encountered—I'm looking for how things have changed. What kind of things did you encounter when you were a patrol officer those first four or five years?

AR: Oh, it wasn't nothing like now!

LW: Versus what you do now. What were the issues and things you ran into then?

AR: One thing, we didn't have the mix in ethnic makeup that we do now. What we have now is definitely great for our community. It's healthy, but it's definitely created
some problems, again, because people have these stereotypes of these different ethnic people and they really grasp people and they really believe that sometimes that Spanish are all this way, blacks are all this way, Asians are all this way.

LW: Five Hispanic males together must be a gang...

AR: Exactly, and that's where the bad rap comes in. But we didn't have that makeup and we didn't have the type of problems that cause some of these ethnic groups to come together to protect "their own" and take care of their own. The problems that we dealt with...we didn't have...we had fight calls, disorderly conduct calls, things of that nature. But nothing like on the level of what we do know where you have weapons involved--homemade weapons, clubs, guns. We didn't have that back then. It was a lot more laid back. Drugs, for example, have always been here and even back then, but they're out there more. More and more. For example, marijuana. Back then, our patrol officers hardly ever got people, young people or older people, with marijuana in their possession. Now you should see the reports that come through. It seems like everybody we stop on weekends, Thursday through Monday, we've got a handful of arrests with possession of marijuana. It's just unbelievable.

LW: And you think that's growing?

AR: Domestics are up. Alcohol problems are even more. There's more of them. The majority of calls we go to on weekends involve drugs or alcohol or some type of drug. It's totally different.

LW: So you're dealing with more violence, more drugs...

AR: Yeah. Some more disrespect among the youth. There's no question about that.
More youth problems.

LW: Why do you think there is a higher level of disrespect and drug use among young people? What's driving that?

AR: Life has changed. Life is not easy. I tell a lot of the youth I deal with, "I tell you, man, I pray for you because times are tougher for you. There's more breakups of families and more situations where you're the older kid, you've got to help your mom out. You've got your brother, just you and your sister or you and your brothers and sisters. You're the oldest. Your dad is gone." The stresses and the pressures even on them are harder. They seem like they're being forced to mature more rapidly. Physically they have, but mentally they haven't. And that's where some of these individuals stray off and no supervision and they get involved with all this other junk on the street with the drugs. Like I said, marijuana is the choice drug and is out there and is easy to get. Cocaine is not very hard to get. They can get it and they start getting into that. Alcohol, they get into it right away. They get with their friends and I see the...Again getting back to the family, the broken, the dysfunctional family, as being one of the major players in their problems. And again with the changes from back then until now, and with the ethnic makeup that we have now has caused problems because blacks can't get along with Spanish, Spanish can't get along with blacks and Asians, or they don't like them because they get everything and we don't get recognition for this. Those are some of the things that I hear. That has caused some of the problems with some of the different ethnic groups. Not all the problem but that has definitely been entered to me several times.
LW: Has the justice system been able to keep up with this dramatic growth of problems?

AR: Just like our department has changed our way of providing service to the community, the community has to. And they know it and they have been and they're doing a good job. That's why Holland is a good community. And why there's a lot here for our youth and the people here who are in the community. They realize that they have to do change. The have to go with the change that's going on in the United States and then... Like it's going on everywhere else, it has to happen here in order to continue to be a good community. And like I said, I'm seeing that in the community. Different agencies finally breaking down barriers and we're working together more. There's a lot more good communication among each other. We're not totally there, but we're doing better. Our methods of providing service are changing again. Instead of a nine to five, they're realizing that in order to meet those needs of some of the people we need to go beyond that and change our ways. And schools the same way. The way they're doing the education aspect. I'm seeing all different forms of changes and it's good.

LW: What kind of organizations do we work more closely with?

AR: When I was in community policing, I worked with pretty much anybody and everybody. I got involved with a lot of our social service agencies, mental health agencies, the school systems. I was very involved with them. Just pretty much anybody and everybody I could get involved with. Which is part of the community policing, for example, officer to expand your resources or to know what's out there to provide for the people, or at least know where to lead them to if need be.
LW: Tell me a little bit about community policing. Walk me through sort of the basics of what that meant.

AR: Community policing is a philosophy, it's a strategy, it's a different form of policing. It's not the traditional aspect of policing where you're in the reactive mode in a police car--you wait until you get a complaint and react to it. This is a proactive approach to policing. It's the old beat-cop type of philosophy. Getting out there and into the community to find out what really are the problems. Because a lot of the problems aren't necessarily criminal in nature or people that are necessarily feared in the certain neighborhoods. They fear a crime or this or that. A lot of it is just a lot of the things that to you may be petty are big things to them. You help them with an issue such as the neighbor across the street has got his grass two feet tall and he's got all this junk in his front yard. You help him clean that area up or that particular place or this abandoned house where it's a drug house or things like that nature. You've done a lot for them...getting out in the neighborhoods, building relationships and the trust factor. Them getting to know you as a person as well as a police officer, as a professional. Getting that two-way communication going with each other. It's just a different form of policing. When people see a police officer they think, "What happened now?" and this type of policing they know who you are, they know you as a person. "Hey, you took my kid...you invited my kid to this function and you put on down in the neighbor this clean up project." You're looked at different and not just as a police officer. Calls come into a community police officer of all different types of stuff. Not all crime issues. That's community policing.
LW: You sort of serve as a liaison to refer people.

AR: Exactly. And you're also exactly that once you build these relationships or expand your knowledge of resources and what's out there, because a lot of times people don't know what is out there. Just them calling you and asking you for some advice. "Well, hey, I know this," or you work with them to connect them with this. "You've done a good job. Oh, man, thanks a lot--you're a savior." I would hear a lot of those type of comments. That's great. Try and get them to eventually police themselves within the neighborhood so they can take care of some of those problems themselves within the neighborhood instead of always calling for you to do it.

LW: Did you see that emerging in the time you were doing it?

AR: Yeah, it takes about four or five years before you can start seeing some of that. The first couple of years are going to be pretty much a lot of handshaking. A lot of talking. Getting to know people. And dealing with some of those issues and crime issues also; but eventually over time they've learned to trust you, know that you do do things for them and you can work together, you did bring the neighborhood together--that they start policing themselves. I was into my fourth year. I was just starting to see that in some areas. I probably would have needed at least another year, five years.

LW: Was that a difficult decision to leave community policing?

AR: Yes, because I enjoyed it. But I needed to move up. I knew I had some more...I enjoyed being an investigator, investigating crimes, and that's what I wanted to do on a full-time basis. I'm going to try to do some form of community policing as an
investigator. Not as much because I don't have that much time any more to stay with the contacts on a daily basis. But I'm going to try next year when we get into spring/summer.

LW: Is the community policing directly a result of the Weed and Seed grants, is it tied into it?

AR: It's tied into it. We did it before we had the Weed and Seed, and then once that became available, it allowed us to the opportunity to expand into full-time.

LW: You spend a lot of time walking the streets.

AR: Yeah. Oh, I did a lot of walking. Once we received the monies for bikes, I took that opportunity and did biking too. I enjoyed it. It was nice. It was awkward for a bit because you're so used to sitting in that car, but people don't get to know you from the car. Unless you're the type of person that does go and make an effort to talk to people beyond just taking their names for reports and that sort of thing. There's not too many guys...because they train them in the academy in the traditional mode and to be reactive. Now it's getting better because they are talking community policing, more of that type of thing.

LW: Has HPD seen the crime decline in those areas of community policing?

AR: Yeah!

LW: You talked to me a little bit about your first impressions of Holland. What other organizations and activities have you been involved in aside from your role in the police department?

AR: I served on the El Centro board a while back, '88 maybe, for about a year and a half,
two years maybe. Matter of fact, I'm back on their board right now. I served on the
St. Francis school board for a couple of years. I know there are some other things I
can't think of. I've been approached to serve on other boards which I haven't been
able to do. I'm also the school truant officer right now. Matter of fact, I was just
approached to see if I wanted to head up or direct that Holland Leadership program.

LW: For the Chamber?

AR: Yeah. There's some other things there.

LW: Do you find that you're tapped a lot because you're Hispanic and...

AR: I wasn't years ago. Now, in the past five years, yeah. I've been approached more.
Because I've been involved in a lot, and that's why a lot of people would call me or
come to me because I got myself...I made it a point to get to know as many people as
possible. I didn't care who or what you were. I really feel this, and I'm not bragging
myself up, but I know myself and compared myself to my fellow officers, I feel I
would go above and beyond and do more for a person than others would, which is
why I've had the success I've had. Word gets on the street that, "Rios...at least he
treats me like a human being. He did this for me." Most guys aren't going to do
certain things for people because "I don't have time," you know. Those are the things
that make a difference with some of the people. That's like the success that I've had.
So I got to know myself. I couldn't walk or ride my bike down the street, get a block
without at least fifteen people beeping the horn or yelling out to me. "How are you
doing, Officer Rios?" which is a good feeling!

LW: Does the church play a significant role in your life?
AR: Yeah. It didn't years ago because it wasn't something that...I just wasn't brought up religious. It wasn't really emphasized. I think it was probably when I was twenty when I started becoming involved with religion and eventually got involved with our Catholic Church.

LW: Was the choice of the Catholic Church because of historic roots in the Catholic Church?

AR: No. That was our religion--Catholicism. Even though we didn't practice it when I was young...I tried a variety of churches when I was younger, up to about my freshman or sophomore year, and then I didn't really go to church any more. Like I said, when I turned about twenty was when I wanted to try my religion, Catholicism. I try to get as involved as possible with that church--to do for my kids what wasn't done for me because it is important. I feel it is important.

LW: I assume it's St. Francis where you're a member? Tell me about the church and some of the dynamics, or the role it plays in the community.

AR: The Catholic Church is a big church and there's a lot of Catholic people in Holland. I've tried different churches and religions, and I've always felt that I got the most out of the Catholic religion. I like the rituals they follow; some of the priests that have been there have been important for me at certain times of my life. It's done a lot for me. I like the Catholic Church. I never thought I would send my kids to a Catholic school, and I did it for a couple reasons. The main reason being that they would get what I didn't get in my early years--because I didn't learn about the Catholic Church and what is involved. What are the sacraments, what is this? What is that? until I
was about twenty when I started learning about them and went through confirmation and what not. Of course, my kids are getting that now and I like seeing that. I do try to practice as much with them as I can through books or through sitting down with their homework, that portion that they get in school. I look at that and I think it’s neat that they’re getting that, whereas I didn’t. I didn’t get that.

LW: Almost an issue of perspective. Perspectives that they can’t get in the public school system. What effect do you think the increasing diversification of ethnicity has had on the community? We talked a little about the crime element, what about other...

AR: Well, for that part we have so many different makeups. Year ago it wasn’t like that—it was always the Dutch community and the Hispanic and that was it. I’m not saying it’s wrong; I think it’s healthy, I think it’s good. I’ve told these kids you’re not going to get around it. You say you don’t like blacks, you don’t like Asians. There’s no two ways about it. Wherever you go, that’s the way it is in the United States, like it or not. You’ve got to have to deal with it and accept it.

LW: Do you think most of the tension is between the minority populations that you’re seeing? That what you’ve mentioned so far or is there...

AR: Only because when I was out there, I would ask the Hispanic kids, ”What is the problem?” ”Oh, those blacks and those Asians and you get all those Asians, you know, they come up here and they think they own the city and the blacks do too, and the Asians come here and they don’t have to pay anything. They get everything free. What about us, man?” That’s some of it. I think about it and somebody mentioned to me once that the city is partly to blame for that because they really never recognize
our youth. Hispanic youth, for example, years ago...And now they're trying to do that but trying to recognize everybody. I'm not blaming but that person told me that. I said, "Yeah, I can understand why that, and some of those feelings that these individuals have mentioned. But then I look at some of these individuals and have tried, "Let's do this. I can get you involved in this." Then they don't want to and I say, "Hey, I want to try to do something for you or this or that. You're complaining because of this or that. I'll do the same thing for you that I would do for them. I don't care who or what they are or their color. I'm going to do the same thing for them. I'm not going to treat you any..." They would expect, for example, better treatment from me being one of their own...to treat them better than somebody else, but that's not what I'm about. "You're a sell-out, man!" I says, "Why am I a sell-out?" "Well you treated a black better than me and I'm Hispanic. We're rasah, we're I say, "That doesn't matter to me. That's not the way I was raised and I don't look at that. I'm a fair person. I'm going to treat you..." I'm more sensitive to some because I understand their culture, but I'm not necessarily going to treat them different. But some of them don't understand that.

LW: Do you think that there is a significant discrimination or racial tension, in a more broad speaking, but discrimination is up and how it manifests itself, between the Anglo larger majority population and the Hispanic community or...

AR: Do I think there's more?

LW: Do you that's a significant part of the community life?

AR: For example, speaking as a police officer because a lot of issues that come up in the
news that you’ve heard over the past couple of years, "White cop beats a black suspect or Spanish or this…” Even though those kind of things happen in other parts of the United States, those carry throughout the United States. So a lot of the Hispanics, a lot of the African-Americans, they see that and they have a mistrust for Anglo. Some of those are deep-seeded from what was told by their grandparents, from the way they were treated. I had some of that. My mom and dad would tell me some of those type of things—not a lot—but they would at least make me aware of that. So you hear that when you deal with them and it become a black-white issue or a brown-white issue. "You're picking on me just because I’m black," and that's not the issue. But those kind of problems that I just mentioned were when you have officers in parts of the United States that are Anglo and that have dealings with minority groups and it's a bad thing, those continue to enhance their perception of a white officer or just white people in general as being that way. I hear a lot of that.

LW: Have you directly seen much of this?

AR: Here? No. I've been here with this department for several years and I wouldn't let that happen. And I'm not going to keep my mouth shut to that. If I see that happen within our department, I would say so. But I don't see that. I haven't seen that.

LW: There seems to be a dearth or an absence of many Hispanic individuals in leadership positions in the community. Now that's slowly changing. Victor is on the city council and Luciano before him. Luciano now running for Jessie's seat. But generally in corporations around town...

AR: You don't see that.
LW: Why do you think that is? Is it a glass ceiling or are there other things going on there?

AR: I'm seeing more and more Hispanics that are getting their education—not enough yet but—because I go down to Texas, certain parts of Texas, and it's different. Because there you see there's all Hispanic police officers and Hispanic judges. There's Hispanic presidents for corporations and this and that, and it's weird because you're not used to seeing that. You come up here and there's hardly nothing like that around here. You're seeing more of it, but some of the Hispanics that are getting their education or masters degrees, they're not sticking around here. They're moving elsewhere. We need them here! Opportunities are here for them, but I'm assuming that they get better opportunities elsewhere. The drop out rate...for example, I'm the school truant officer. I get a lot of calls, and I can show you all the forms I've gotten--there have been a lot of Hispanic kids.

LW: Do you think most of that is because education isn't as emphasized in the home or...?

AR: Some of it. That's part of it and also I'm looking where these kids and their families, where they're coming from. It's either the broken family or an intact family but there's an alcohol or drug problem involved. Or it's a situation where they can't supervise. There isn't very good parenting skills in some of those families, so the kids is not getting some of their needs and they look elsewhere, and then they start directing...the tension has them doing other stuff and getting in trouble. Some of it is a cop out, and then they try to place blame on you or the pastor or the criminal justice system or this and this. That's not the case. They can't blame themselves.
LW: An issue that has come up recently, at least I've seen it in the Press, is the fact that juvenile or non-juvenile offenders are treated differently based on their race. Do you have any experience with that?

AR: That's with the court system apparently. With us, we arrest people—we don't look at black or white. Again, it's out there but here...I've worked here long enough and like I said, if I've seen that that was an issue, I would say something.

LW: Do you see it in the judicial branch as you see it played out?

AR: It's dealing with a juvenile. I definitely agree that they need some more Hispanics or...(end of side one)...I don't think they do a good enough...They don't have a good system in place where they go and recruit and try to get some of the Hispanic professionals to deal with the juvenile probation or the court system up there. I just don't see that. You don't see them up there and they don't...Even the sheriff's department, I don't feel they do...We do! Why can't they? They need it. They have a lot of ethnic makeup on the north side, and I don't see them actively being involved. If you have to go out of state to do it, do it! I don't see them doing that, and the court system needs to do that.

LW: Do you think the HPD has done a good job of diversification in its police department?

AR: I think we do a good job. Yeah. We try! I can definitely say that. Our previous chief would constantly come up to some us, "Do you know any good candidates that are Hispanic? They don't need the four-year degree. We can work around it. Somebody that's going to be dedicated and qualified at least a couple of years that we can push them through the rest later." And even this chief, the same thing. We're
always looking to hire good candidates whether they be African-American, Asian or Hispanic, because you need that.

LW: Are there any African-American or Asian members of the HPD?

AR: We have African-Americans and Asian... We have one Asian cadet and we had a couple of others that just didn't work out. But we definitely do try and get that representation in our department.

LW: What role does Hope College play in the community from your point of view?

AR: I've never really had much contact with Hope College. I don't know. Honestly? (laughs). Honestly I never cared much for Hope College. I've always seen it as being an upscale college and I'm going to be frank with you. My sister went there and she graduated from there. I've always seen it pretty much like I said. It's an Anglo upscale college geared for that. You don't have too many Hispanics that would be able to afford to come here. If they have the grades, maybe, and through scholarships and that, but... So I never really took much interest in Hope College or getting involved with it. They've had the CASA program for years. I wish I had known about it when I was in high school. I would have loved to have gotten involved with it, but I never had any involvement with Hope College.

LW: So you think it's relatively unavailable and doesn't have a lot of impact?

AR: To me, they seem to be doing more, but I don't know. I guess I really can't say how much they're doing because I don't see a lot of it or I don't hear a lot of it. I'm going to be honest with you--I'm not going to say I love Hope College when in fact I don't have any interest in Hope College. I never did.
LW: You never had much contact.

AR: You're right. That's probably why. I just never had the contact. I guess I looked at it similar like to Holland Christian. Holland Christian when I was going to Zeeland, was always portrayed to me as being upscale, white people. That's what I was told. It was an uppity school. Not necessarily white, but an uppity school which was geared for a more wealthy student. Even the group of friends I hung around with there was always somewhat of a dislike between Zeeland High and certain people in Holland Christian. We never wanted to do anything with them.

LW: Do you think that's what has caused some of the athletic difficulties we've read about in the paper lately? With them cancelling games because of athletic events getting out of hand. I don't know if you read about that in the paper or heard about it.

AR: No, I haven't. You mean between Holland Christian?

LW: Between Holland Christian and Zeeland?

AR: No, I haven't, and I usually keep up pretty well with Zeeland.

LW: They suspended games for two years because of an outburst last year.

AR: Yeah. It wouldn't surprise me. Don't get me wrong. Hope College is a great college. But for me, it never did nothing. I never really cared to get involved a lot with Hope College just because I really never was approached to...

LW: Has the role of women changed in Holland over the years you've been here?

AR: Oh yes. Definitely. Since I moved here, women are very active in any and every role. Even here in Holland in all types of jobs. Which is good! I have no problem with it. I've have no problem working with a female officer.
LW: Do you have a significant number of female officers?
AR: Yeah, I think we have six or seven female officers.
LW: How big is the department as a whole?
AR: Oh, I think 62, 65, right around there. But like I said, I think it's great.
LW: Have the women officers on the force had more difficulty in any aspect where they were dealing with the public or internally?
AR: No. They do a great job—speaking here. For the most part, they do a great job. Yeah, you get some females in our position here that you may not necessarily want for certain calls because are they really going to be able to help me out if something were to really happen? But for the most part, I think our female officers that we have do a real good job and handle themselves very well. They pretty much seem to hold their own.
LW: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland and how have they affected the community? Anything come to mind?
AR: Controversies? Just general?
AR: There's a lot of controversy about a lot of different issues. Look at the issues with the area center and the Windmill Island and...
LW: Just taking those two, give me your thoughts on them.
AR: I think it's a good idea. Matter of fact, I thought it would be good to have it over here. It's good for the college. It's good for downtown. But the choice they have been eyeing now over here by the waterfront I think that would be even better. It still
could benefit everybody. Yes, there's been some issues like well how is it going to benefit because it should benefit, it should be something for the whole community. I mean everybody. Even the county is going to partake probably in that expense. How is it going to benefit the Hispanic? I don't know if you've heard that--I've heard that. "What's it going to do for us? for the Hispanic people? How are we going to be able to use it?" See, I'm talking for the Hispanics--you don't see them getting involved in a lot of things. I have my daughter involved in the swim team now, my eight year old. She's the only Hispanic. It's all Anglo. I have her involved in other activities. There's no Hispanics. Why not? Again, "Hey, it's your fault. You got just as much right to take your kid or get him involved in this.' You know, hey, if they open that place up, you're paying taxes or some expense to it. It's there for you. Go use it. It's your fault if you're going to sit back and say...It's there! If they have meeting rooms. If there's a procedure you have to follow--they're going to let you to use it. They're not going to deny you...

LW: Do you think there is a desire to have institutions and places like that dedicated solely for use of Hispanic individuals? Is that sort of what they're thinking or...I'm just trying to get at why...

AR: It seems that way sometimes that it's got to be geared so we can use it. You start separating yourselves. Yeah, some of it is okay but...What we're trying to do here is bring everybody together. Integrate. Why can't we have Anglos or Asians or African-Americans on the board that mainly deals with a lot of Hispanic issues? Why not? We're all here together! We all want the same things for...I know what I want
for my kids. A lot of the same things you may want for your kids...we all want them to have a good life! We all want them to be in a safe place or whatever the case may be. This thing of separating—that's not the way I want my kids to be.

LW: Do you think that's unique because of your experience growing up in Zeeland?
AR: Yeah. I'm just different! If you talk to a lot of Hispanics around here, I think you compare and they say I stand out different. My brother gets on my case. "You're like a white boy, man. You grew up like a white boy." I says, "I'm not...!" He's just joking around because the things that I do in my home that you don't necessarily see in a Hispanic. How many Hispanic families do you see raise the American flag up on their pole, or how many Hispanic families do you see doing this or doing that. You don't see that a lot. He kind of jokes with me about that, but that's just the way I am.

LW: What things do you do in your home differently? You mentioned the flag. What other things?
AR: I practice my culture, but to a point. You go to my home—it's like an American home. Just the way it's all set up with the country style...A lot of Hispanic homes you go to it's not necessarily set up that way. It's like I'm an Anglo. Just other things that I do in my home that are done different. I love Spanish music. That's all I strictly listen to. That's all my kids hear a lot. And I speak Spanish in my home and we eat Spanish food. We go to Spanish functions and what not. But it's just different being in my home compared to if you go to other Spanish persons' homes and see how they live—from cleanliness up to whatever, and then go in my home and
you'll see the difference.

**LW:** The cultural organizations in town—the museum, the Archives, the Arts Council and some others, seem to have difficulty either in reaching out or building bridges with the Hispanic community. We see it here at the Joint Archives in just trying to collect anything, letters, anything from a Hispanic. Culture. We try to document that. Why do you think that is and are there ways to...?

**AR:** It's tough to bring Spanish people together. Matter of fact, when I met with Lou Hallacy a little bit ago about this program of bringing other cultures together to orient them to what's out here and what it's about, it's tough getting Spanish people involved. You tell them and you tell them, and "What do you want me to do? Go grab you by the hand and..." We're practically begging you to come or get involved...but they don't show up! It's always the same people all the time. All the same Hispanics all the time. Very rarely do we get new ones. It's just tough! I don't have an answer how to get them involved. I know I've done my share of being out there in the community talking to them--explaining, telling them why it's important, and they just don't.

**LW:** Do you think there's a perceivable generation gap in Holland? Young people having difficulty interacting with older people? Lack of understanding between generations?

**AR:** I know the youth will say that there is. "You don't understand me." "Yeah, I do!" I don't think it's a problem. I think we are recognizing a lot of youth and trying to incorporate them, get them involved in issues that are adult issues. "We want to hear you. Your input is valuable." We're doing a better job of that, so there's better
communications. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think it's a big problem.

LW: Have the problems and concerns of the average Holland citizen changed over the fifteen years you've been working in Holland?

AR: I think they're about the same. In spite of the constant growth and the ethnic makeup, I think pretty much the same.

LW: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life?

AR: I've been successful and I don't realize...A lot of times my wife has to tell me how successful I've been at various points in my life. I know I sure do think a lot about a lot of different things. One of the big turning points in my life was when I accepted God. I had my fabulous experience which was when I was around twenty or twenty-one. That was a big turning point in my life. That definitely was.

LW: Was it surrounding a crisis in life or was it a challenge?

AR: It was just the acceptance of God...Just the experience I went through--a great experience. Just that kind of made me mature a lot more and look at life different. And really how valuable...and I just think different. I just totally...

LW: Really changed your purpose in life...

AR: Yeah, my perception of life and the tragedies of life and my outlook on things. That was a big thing in my life. That particular point. That changed a lot for me.

LW: Has there been someone or some people if there are more than one, who have influenced or affected your life in a profound way?

AR: There were actually two instructors at Zeeland High. One more so than the other that changed my life. Helped me out with my life. Got me going. God only knows
where I would have been if she wouldn't have assisted me. But also the two people that pretty much took us under their wing when we first arrived in Zeeland and really cared for us and followed us right up to when he passed away about a year and a half ago. He was happy to see where I was at and really took interest in me a lot, seeing me up to the end until he died. Yeah, there's definitely been some people.

LW: Your thoughts on Tulip Time?

LW: I like Tulip Time, but I'd like to see different...I know it's a Dutch heritage and a Dutch thing, but you need to change things! I understand what they're saying, but things need to be changed. That's my opinion why they're losing interest in a lot of...

AR: How would you like it to be changed?

LW: For example, speaking for bands and the Saturday parade. Why can't you bring in other bands? Why can't you bring in a couple of major college bands? Why do they have to be high school? Change it a little bit. Change some of the activities that they have. It seems a lot of activities seem to be geared for the elderly. Why can't you have some activities for the youth or for our age group that may interest us? I know it's hard to please everybody, but you could do some of those things and I think you are going to draw more attention and get those crowds back up. I think what they're going to do to Windmill Island, I think that will help. Otherwise it's the same thing year in and year out. It gets old. As I say, you need to change things whether you like it or not. I know it's Dutch heritage, but there's no reason why you can't change things. The parade I thought was great this year on Saturday. There was some change to it. Some additions.
LW: What are your thoughts on bilingual education in the school systems?
AR: You mean learning different languages?
LW: Teaching individuals in their native tongue as part of the educational curriculum in Holland Public or West Ottawa or whatever?
AR: Oh, I think it's great. You need opportunities to learn different languages or have that...Yeah, I think it's great. I know there's been a lot of controversy with that and with English only, making it the official language. I understand if you're here you should speak English. I agree if you're here, you should learn it, but I don't think you need to be made to talk it. In my work place, if they're going to frown on me because I talk with a partner in Spanish, I don't think that's right. You can't tell me not to speak Spanish. Why not? I'm Spanish; he's Spanish. I like talking Spanish. That's the way Spanish people are. We talk in English and Spanish all the time together.
LW: I realize you don't have direct involvement, I'm just trying to get your opinion in general terms. How has the role of industry changed in Holland over the past couple of decades that you've been here?
AR: Industry here, Ottawa County and Holland, what I've seen has changed a lot. They also are finding different ways to meet the needs of the employee. How to better motivate them. Changing their ways in some structures of doing what needs to be done for profit and yet also not strictly...keeping in mind the employees are an important part of that component. Changing things also. From what I've seen of different plants and talking to people that work in different industries here in our city.
How they've changed their mode of service to them and to the person that they servicing in the community or whoever else they're servicing outside the community. I've seen a big change also. Everybody--they're looking for different ways of change within their own industry. Factories for example.

LW: Let's go back to law enforcement. What is it like to be a detective?

AR: I enjoy it. A lot of people think Holland...gee, there's nothing in Holland. You come and work here for a year and then talk to me later. Yeah. It's not like your big city, but I tell you, there are a lot of things that happen. Being a detective is great! I enjoy it. I enjoy investigating. I feel I have a knack for it. I have the personality for it. I love talking with people, and even up to this point I've had success. I've been in there six months. For example unfortunately, the tragic incident happened at Pereddie’s, and I got called out. I was the on call detective but also of course other detectives got called out because it's a big case. I'm not saying that it was all because of me, but because of my ties with the community and community policing and the people I knew, I was able to provide what was necessary to break it. Then we worked as a team, and I think everybody did a fabulous job.

LW: You were able to lead to the suspects because of your contacts?

AR: Yes, we knew the suspects. I worked that whole night. That morning, I talked to somebody whom I knew from my ties and that gave us what we needed. Then we went from there. We pretty much knew by noon. We just needed to grab some people and get them in...

LW: I don't know the details of the case, but had the suspects shared their activities with
others and that's how you found out about it?

AR: Yeah.

LW: It wasn’t directly through the physical evidence at the scene?

AR: Right.

LW: I'm sure it tied in later, but at the time...

AR: Sharing some things with some people and that kind of thing gave me pretty much gave me what we needed to target right away because that's going to be our weak link in this thing, and I think this person will break if we approach him short of giving up any confidential source. And sure enough, it worked. So even up to this point, being in it six months, I've had success with it because of that and a couple other cases that worked out real well. It's hard to believe the success that I have attained here at the police department. Every once in a while my wife has to remind me, "You've been successful!" I tell a lot of these kids, especially a lot of Hispanic kids I've dealt with, "If I can do it, don't tell me you can't do it. My life wasn't like it is now with you. I feel for you because times are tougher for you. But I did my share of stuff. I went through problems. Had problems in my growing up and there's no reason why you can't. Don't feed me this thing about being in high school and they being prejudiced and this and that. If you're going to let that hold you back, if you're going to whine about it and you're going to fall to them by dropping out, well then that's your problem. Because, hey, if I can do it you got to overlook that and go beyond that because there's always going to be some form of prejudice, racism until you die, so live with it and go on and show them that you not going to submit and fall to that."
LW: What were your thoughts on the aftermath from the Perredies incident with the flag issue and the mayor?

AR: I don't think the mayor did that out of...the tragic incident. It was just a thing that just kind of...did that and it happened and never thought about the other ramifications that were going to come about. But I don't think it was an issue.

LW: An immediate reaction to a tragedy.

AR: Exactly. Yeah, I don't think he was wrong. You do it one day. There's nothing wrong with that. I don't see anything wrong with that. But I can see where some of the people...I don't believe the mayor is that way. At least my contacts with him...

LW: Any other thoughts or remarks that we haven't covered?

AR: No, not really. We talked a lot!

LW: Been all over with our talk today.

AR: We talked a lot. No. To me, it's an honor when people call me, for example in your situation, and want to learn a little about me and being Hispanic--I find that neat. Because usually it's "Who care's about you? Who wants to hear about you?" It's an honor.

LW: What did you think of the Sesquicentennial overall?

AR: I think that was neat.

LW: It turned out all right?

AR: I think that was real heat. Good for the city, good for the community.

LW: This project actually is a part of that. These interviews are something that we're trying to leave a legacy for the future.
AR: I think that's neat because God only knows what it's going to be like in fifty or a hundred years!

LW: That's right. Could be totally different..

AR: Yeah, they're going to look back and listen or read this, and go "Wow." Like I said, God only knows what it's going to be like for our kids and their kids.

LW: That's right. Well, thanks for taking time to talk with me today.

AR: Thank you.