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

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Oral History Interview with
Al Serrano

(unedited)

Conducted November 7, 1997
by Geoffrey Reynolds

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
GR: Could you please state your name and date of birth?

AS: Al Serrano, [date removed], 1951.

GR: Have you always lived in Holland, Al, and if not where did you start?

AS: I was born in Texas and we came to Michigan when I was three.

GR: What town in Texas?

AS: Austin, Texas. My father’s family, my aunts and uncles on my father’s side, are still in Austin; and my mother’s family, my aunts and uncles on her side, are here in Holland.

GR: Tell me your first impressions of Holland as a child, as far back as you can remember.

AS: My first impressions of Holland were that I didn’t feel any different than anybody else. Most of my friends were non-Hispanic friends. We lived in a neighborhood where my aunts and uncles and grandparents lived in a cluster of housing. But around us was a housing development of mostly English speaking people. That’s how I grew up, with friends who spoke English. I went to school basically just learning English.

GR: Did you speak Spanish in the house?

AS: I understood Spanish because my parents spoke Spanish and then my grandparents as well. They spoke Spanish to each other, but they didn’t speak Spanish to us. As far
as I can remember, I don’t remember growing up speaking Spanish. I’m sure I was raised that way, but as I went to school and had the friends that I had when we came to Michigan, it was pretty much purely English. My parents spoke Spanish to us and we responded in English.

GR: So do you know a lot of Spanish still?

AS: I know a lot of Spanish because I went to Hope College and Holland High and took formal classes. The teachers were surprised in high school because they assumed my being Mexican that I would naturally learn or know everything about Spanish. But I really came to those classes to learn like everybody else. I guess I view it like anybody would view it in terms of taking English classes, not so much that you need to learn how to speak it, as much as you need to know how to read it, write it, and the formal parts of the language. I didn’t think that was unusual for me to want to accomplish that.

GR: Did you have any brothers and sisters when you were growing up?

AS: Yes, five brothers and one sister, and I’m the oldest. My sister is the youngest and we’re ten years apart almost to the day.

GR: Are they all living in Holland still?

AS: Yes. They are all living in Holland with the exception of one who is living in Jenison. He works at the Kent County Airport for Federal Express.

GR: Your mom and dad are still in Holland?

AS: Yes. My mother and dad are both retired; yes, they’re still in Holland. They’re going to Texas, I hope, well they’re thinking, at the end of this month to spend the
winter there for the first time.

GR: Since they’ve moved here?

AS: Since they moved here back in about ’54.

GR: Why did your dad relocate to Holland from Texas?

AS: That’s not really clear to me. Being three years old, I really wouldn’t know at the time, but from listening and understanding it was mostly that my parents didn’t really have much going over there economically. My grandparents on my mother’s side were up here in Michigan, and they were picking pickles, apples, cherries, blueberries, you know, that summer work. They had established their household here. So my father was the only one that was working there in Texas and putting in a lot of hours and very little pay and came up here basically just to explore the opportunities. As it turned out, they both got jobs right away and they never went back.

GR: What jobs did they start out with?

AS: My father started out at the Smith and Douglas Fertilizer Plant on the north side, off of James Street I think. He worked there for about ten years. My mother worked at the Ideal Cleaners. She started off at Michigan Laundry, then moved on to Ideal Cleaners and worked there at least ten or fifteen years.

GR: What are some of the organizations you’ve been involved in?

AS: The Mexican American Youth Organization, MAYO, when I was in high school. I led a group of young people trying to really understand their culture and who they were and how they fit in basically, pretty much kind of a self-awareness group. I was
part of the Upward Bound program. I worked there as a tutor/counselor and a dorm
counselor with mostly Hispanic students.

GR: Do you still do that today?

AS: No, I don't do that today. I used to be part of their Upward Bound advisory board—I
did that for ten years at Hope College. I was also a participant and a co-editor of a
bilingual newsletter we used to have called El Mestizo. And we did that since 1971
through about 1984. It was a bilingual newsletter trying to inform the Hispanic
population of things that maybe the newspaper wouldn't cover, and also urging them
to vote or taking advantage of certain services that they were eligible for.

GR: Was that in Spanish?

AS: That was Spanish and English. At one time I was part of the Human Relations
Commission for a couple of years before I went off to Michigan State University. I
was also part of a group called Helping Our Youth. It was called HOY. It was a
substance abuse prevention program. Those are some of the things I was involved in
probably through 1983, but I've been involved in the community in a bunch of
different things over the years.

GR: Do you have any current involvements that you really like?

AS: The most current involvement is that I've been appointed to the Family Independence
Agency from Ottawa County, on their board of directors. I'm fairly new, so although
I know a little bit about what used to be the Department of Social Services, they're
going in a new direction and so I have to really pick up on what they're doing. I'm
part of the Holland Exchange Club. That has been an interesting involvement. They
pretty much look at education for young people, as well as child abuse prevention. They also look at programs for senior citizens. And they contribute or get involved in different community projects. The other one is the Ottawa County Dispute Resolution Center. I’m on their board of directors, but I’m also a volunteer mediator. It’s training that you receive by the state and the County Dispute Resolution Center pretty much schedules you to try to resolve whenever there are disputes between individuals or groups. They can vary from consumer issues to tenant landlord, sometimes marital, sometimes family problems. But as a volunteer mediator, they schedule me for that from time to time.

GR: You keep busy.

AS: Yes, besides the work that I’m doing here, it’s volunteer time that I put in.

GR: Tell me a little bit about where you work.

AS: Well, I work here at El Centro and I’ve been here for almost two and a half years. I’m the executive director. I’m also a certified social worker and a case manager. We have a small staff and I supervise another case manager and four part-time therapists. It’s an agency that provides social services for the Hispanic community, in particular those whose majority or whose language is Spanish and who have very little functional English. So we provide counseling and therapy, mental health therapy, in Spanish with some cultural sensitivity—which means sensitivity to the culture and the way they live, trying to put their feelings, their emotions into the situations in the context that they’re living in. So because we have bilingual, bicultural therapists, we feel that we can be most effective in dealing with their mental health issues. So that’s
pretty much El Centro.

GR: El Centro translates into...

AS: El Centro translates to The Center. I guess you could interpret that into meaning a lot of different things, but I’m not really that much aware of where that name actually came from. Actually it did come from El Centro Latino, The Latin Center, and it was first established in Muskegon. Then they established a satellite office in Holland, and then the one in Muskegon was dropped off. It became El Centro here in Holland and Latino was dropped off.

GR: Why do you think the Muskegon office closed? Was there any information about that?

AS: My feeling is that the Muskegon office closed because there was not that much proactive involvement by the Hispanic community to keep it open. Funding sources were drying up and the different activities that they were involved in, because those funding sources dried up they pretty much stopped providing services or were limited in the services they could provide. In Holland, we didn’t do the same thing they were doing there. We mainly concentrated on the mental health and counseling issues. We were able to pick up different sources of funding, which allowed the agency to pretty much survive.

GR: So this is a publicly funded group?

AS: It’s funded through United Way in both Allegan and Ottawa County. Some funding comes from the City of Holland. A major portion of the funding comes through contract work from the Community Mental Health in Ottawa County, some contract
work out of Allegan County Mental Health, and also a contract with Holland Hospital for their psychiatric ward. Then we pick up other grants and other opportunities that come along. We picked up a state jobs grant when they had, was it Tyson Foods that closed?

GR: Right.

AS: When they closed they wanted us to do some counseling with their Spanish speaking employees in terms of trying to make the transition from the plant closing to understanding what their benefits were and also trying to find new employment. So we got a grant especially for that.

GR: Was that successful through your office do you think?

AS: Yes. We found that people felt a little bit more comfortable with the situation that they were in. It's a stressful situation. But as a result of having somebody to speak to them in their language very comfortably and very easily, I think they were able to understand what they qualified for financially and what they could do as a transition. Everybody deals with these problems differently, but I think as a result of us being there, it helped people cope with it much better.

GR: Since you’ve come to Holland what have been some of the most significant changes you’ve witnessed, I guess since you were three. What were some of the things that are significantly different than today?

AS: Well, what I’ve witnessed is probably a more acceptance of the Hispanic population in this community. There used to be a time when there was a feeling that people didn’t really want you around. If you went into certain places you felt not welcomed.
But, over time, and probably more recently in the last ten to fifteen years, that's changed a lot. And I think primarily because more and more people have settled here. I don’t think people have settled here because they felt welcomed, but I think people settled here because they were needed. They were needed to fill in positions in manual type labor, work that didn’t require a lot of education, but required a lot of desire and a lot of determination to work in a physical environment. One example was H. J. Heinz. Even to this day they have difficulty trying to fill positions, but they have historically welcomed Hispanic workers there because it is the kind of work most people don’t want to do. It smells bad (laughs), and physically I’m sure it’s demanding, and the pay historically has not been the greatest--I’m sure it’s better now. But somebody with more technical skills and more education, it is not something that they would generally do. But for Hispanics, it was a natural transition from the migrant fields, picking blueberries, pickles, or apples, to a more permanent setting in Heinz, which gave them a little bit more stability, more security, and then they didn’t have to move around the country as much. So, it worked good for Heinz, but I think it worked good for the Hispanic population as well. And I think a lot of the people who have been here for two or three generations if not four, you’ll find that they have a history at H. J. Heinz.

GR: Those types of manual jobs that you talked about, have those developed into more highly educated and permanent positions in other companies?

AS: No, there’s a lot of highly labor intensive industries here, and I think that’s what makes a great fit for the Hispanic community, because first of all, if you work as a
migrant you work seven days a week. You work from sun-up to sun-down. It used
to be where your whole family was out there working with you. That’s why migrant
work was so appealing because everybody could work out there no matter how old
you were and still contribute to the family income. Whereas, if you worked in a
factory, only one person worked and the rest probably couldn’t find employment or
they were too young to work in the first place. That kind of transition from the
migrant field to labor intensive kind of work kind of fit naturally because they would
work the overtime, they would work the weekends. They worked whenever they
needed to work because they were used to doing it, and most the time it was probably
easier work than being out in the fields. Also, one person could probably earn as
much income as a whole family. It became a natural transition. As far as Hispanics
being more upward mobile in terms of other types of positions, I think the education
level is still real low as a median for Hispanics. But there’s been some things,
primarily through the Hope College Upward Bound program, that have done a lot to
bring in Hispanics who have become more educated and have taken more leadership
roles in the community and higher level positions, administrative levels, or public
service type of employment. I think Holland has benefited from the Hope College
Upward Bound program. It’s been there for almost thirty years, and I think without
an effort like that in which they promoted young people to go to college, Holland
probably wouldn’t have as many Hispanic professionals that are out there in different
fields in the community as there are now. A lot of them are pretty much home
grown.
GR: Which is good for the community too.

AS: Yes, right.

GR: Holland has been recognized as one of ten All-American cities. What qualities do you think earned Holland this honor? What things stand out in your mind?

AS: Well, I'm not sure exactly how they viewed that, but I suppose when I think about that I realize that they made a presentation that Holland was diverse in its population. Even though they had a black child, young person there, it's not as diverse in that area as it probably could be or should be. But I think it was a symbol of saying that yes, Holland has an open arm or a welcoming attitude to groups of different cultural backgrounds. I think they tried to reflect that by the people who went to the presentation. They tried to show diverse backgrounds, which I think Holland is developing into that kind of community, with Asian, and Hispanic, black, and Indian and so forth—a lot of ethnic groups. I think that Holland more recently has opened up in a sense that I think they're heading towards more of a global type of attitude because industry is headed toward a global economy. I think that the community is starting to grasp that this is a microcosm of what the world is like and that the community and everything about the community should reflect those that are in the community. I think part of that was that they showed that diversity and they brought that diversity with them to the presentation and showed some pride in that. But I also think that Holland, for the size, is probably... I'm really amazed by the number of social service programs and programs that people bring in and develop, to take the initiative to develop to help people in the community to live a better life overall,
whether it be in education, whether it be in special employment support services, developing some skills. People have been very creative when they see a problem or an issue and they try to find solutions to those problems and issues. So they have developed a multitude of social service support systems that really help individuals in the community probably to enrich them and help them become more or less a contributing part of this community. And for a small community like Holland, it impresses me in terms of how much they have in terms of social service type activity that’s here for the small area. And of course, we have a lot of churches. Maybe some of that might come from that religious background of trying to help your fellow man. That amazes me, actually, how much they have invested in different groups and volunteer organizations that want to help you.

GR: What things does the community still need to work on?

AS: The community needs to work on, first of all, is I think education. It is so crucial to the advancement of minority populations, especially Hispanic populations. They need to work on strengthening their public school system. They’ve done a lot recently, and I give them all the credit for that, but they still haven’t really done anything, or not as much as I would hope, for the prevention of Hispanics dropping out of high school before graduation.

GR: Are there symptoms that Holland Public Schools could fix when you talk about that?

AS: Well, I’m not so sure…

GR: Are there reasons?

AS: I’m not so sure they can fix them. It’s hard for me to pinpoint. I have a gut feeling
about it. My feeling has been, in this area in general, and that includes the educational system as well as in the world of employment and so forth, and especially in the churches that shows up quite a bit, is that they want Hispanics to assimilate. They want Hispanics to kind of just dump everything—their culture, their language and so forth—and become like who they are. Obviously they can't because of skin color, and of course there's always the difficulty of learning English, but that comes along in time. But that feeling of not total acceptance. The feeling of we're willing to live together because we need each other, especially in the employment field area because it's such a significant part of that part of the community. In the schools, the same attitude is "Well, we need to make you like we are in order for you to be successful," instead of saying we accept who you are and what you have to contribute, and therefore we want to help you to be successful, but we want you to feel good and proud about who you are. There's so much effort of trying to change people into something they're not that it tends to make people feel bad about who they represent. That in turn backfires, especially in young children or young adults because they need so desperately to find out who they are, who they represent, and what positive things they have to contribute. While the school preaches that, I don't think they demonstrate it thoroughly throughout the system. I think there are individuals in parts of the school system that do, but not enough and consistent and significant enough to make a difference.

GR: Is there any one school in your opinion that is trying harder than the other two, including the charter schools?
AS: I really think that Van Raalte is probably trying the hardest because they're the ones that have developed this program called, I think, Communities and Schools. A lot of that has to do with the principal and her opening her doors and trying to integrate the elementary school with the surrounding community.

GR: Is that a neighborhood school for Hispanic population?

AS: It's a neighborhood school and it now has the highest concentration of Hispanics because the Hispanic population has shifted as development has shifted from the north side of town shifting toward the south side because there is more development on the north side and some of the lower income housing as been destroyed or demolished. So, it is a core city neighborhood, mostly residential, and there's a lot of Hispanics there. I'm sure that they are one of the highest percentage Hispanic elementary schools in the whole district. But I think that they are doing a good job in the sense that they are trying to be supportive to families and trying to be sensitive and trying to promote everybody's culture and what they have to contribute. In a sense, it's good for the young people, but when they leave that environment and go into the middle schools and high schools, it doesn't follow up. I'm saying that it's not good that they don't follow up. It's not enough. It's a good experience while you're there, but then when you leave, you face something quite different. There's just not enough going on in the middle schools and in the high school to help Hispanics feel that they are an important part of that school. I think one of the examples is the Upward Bound program at Hope College. The good thing about that is that they have about sixty or seventy students and now you're the focus. Now you have to perform. Now
we have high expectations of you. You are it. This is sixty, seventy people. All our energies are coming to you. You can't just kind of be with the group of eight or nine or a hundred or a thousand or so and just kind of fall by the way side and we'll kind of overlook you. You have to perform and we are going to monitor your performance. We have these high expectations and if something is not happening, we are going to help you right away. I think kids respond to that kind of attention, that kind of expectation, and I think they produce. Upward Bound is an example of that because they do produce and they do go on to college. Probably a lot of them go in there thinking they won't ever go to college. But by the time they're through, they definitely know they're going. Again, it's how do you get that kind of attention to everybody? How do you help young people feel positive about themselves so that they do want to perform and do have some hope for the future and have high expectations. Then how do you deal with a system that pretty much the curriculum is based around not everybody going to college. I'm not saying everybody needs to go to college, but I think everybody ought to prepare for it in case they can go, because it's not going to hurt them to get that kind of academic preparation. But the curriculum is not based on that. The curriculum is based on so many teachers teach algebra, so many teachers teach consumer math, and so many teachers teach chemistry or physics. So there's not room for everybody to take chemistry. There's not room for everybody to take physics. So, consequently, you got to go over here and you have to take this and you have to take home ec and woodshop and something else. And who usually falls in those areas? Mostly Hispanic kids because they're
tracked and they have lower expectations, not only of themselves, but people also have them of them. So you don’t prepare everybody with the same level of education. You prepare those for college who you expect will go to college, and that is usually non-Hispanic students. You do have your exceptions though. And that’s where Upward Bound comes into the picture. They bring in kids who may not be doing exceptionally well academically, but when they come into Upward Bound, the expectation is that they will go to college and they go. But the school system is not designed to accommodate everybody for college prep. So they divide everybody else up, and I don’t think Hispanics get a fair chance at those other academic opportunities.

GR: Describe the role the Church has played in your life while in Holland.

AS: When we first came into town...well, we’re a Catholic family, culturally Catholic I call it, because we were raised Catholic, expected to be Catholic. It wasn’t a choice, that’s pretty much who you are. And so, we attended the Catholic Church. There was always some approaches by Reformed Churches to try to include us as part of the church as kind of as a visitor, the kind of thing to see if we might be interested, but that never seemed to work out. There was one Christian Reformed Church that was totally Hispanic, and as kids they would pick us up in the bus and go to Sunday School and go to Sunday services. That worked out for a while. But then, we still pretty much stayed Catholic. We really have not, at least I haven’t, gotten involved in the Church that much. We used to belong to Crossroads Chapel, which started out as primarily a Hispanic ministry by the Reformed Church in America. Andy Fierro
has been the minister there and he has turned it into a more or less multicultural church, feeling that the Reformed Church ought to reflect a multicultural aspect versus just saying this a Hispanic Reformed Church. While attending there, I didn’t receive this message from Andy because we didn’t really go to church when he was there very much. We went when there was another minister there from New York who happened to be there. But, the Reformed Church attitude was we need to have a Hispanic Reformed Church because we want to respect that they’re different in the way they worship. Their assumption was that somehow we would not worship like they worship in their church. We would worship so significantly different that it wouldn’t make any sense for them to integrate us, but to actually separate us so that we could worship the way we wanted. A lot of that was that there would be a lot of dancing or jumping around and clapping and screaming and yelling. And in some cases that is true, but that’s not true about all Hispanics in terms of how they worship. Certainly the Catholic Church is not that way (laughs). The Catholic Church is pretty close to the Reformed Church type of worship in the sense that it is quiet. The Catholic Church has been trying to pick it up a little bit (laughs).

GR: Is there a particular parish that you belong to now?

AS: No. We don’t belong to a church right now. We’ve be thinking about going back to Crossroads Chapel and becoming part of that. My wife also grew up Catholic as well. Her family and my side of the family have not really been connected to any church in particular.

GR: What role does the Church play in Holland? Do you think that’s important within the
city and within the college?

AS: The church plays a significant role in that I think it plays a behind the scenes role, probably too often. Since most of the people attend a church, you would hope that they're getting some kind of moral, religious education, which is important I think in dealing out in the world of business and in education and in your professional life, that hopefully you would reflect those kinds of beliefs and morals out there as well. I think that that has a significant influence on how Hispanics have been welcomed into this community. Some people treat it as kind of as a mission work. In that sense, that has opened a door because they feel like, "Why put a lot of money in sending somebody to Africa or to South America when we have some people here who could be from those countries and struggling here and they are in our own backyard. So let's have a mission work here kind of thing." I think that's been good in the sense that they're more focused in their own backyard, which is an important focus, and that shouldn't be ignored. So I think that's helped in a lot of ways, that the churches have promoted that kind of backyard ministry, or mission work as they call it. It might be a little paternalistic, but I think their intentions at least are good. The only thing that I'm disappointed, I guess, with the Church is that there's not enough integration. Again, it's that feeling of "if your different and we think you worship different, you should have your own." Instead of saying, "well, maybe we need to open our doors and bring in more Hispanic families into our own ministries, incorporate them in part of our ministry." But I think the Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church have done that in particular. Like I said, the Christian
Reformed Church all Hispanic and the Reformed Church with Andy. Now the Catholic Church, what they’ve done is, of course there are a lot of Hispanics in the Catholic Church, and so they’ve mixed very well. But because they have multiple services, they have at least one service that is in Spanish.

GR: Saturday night?

AS: I believe so. But at least they are trying to accommodate that within their own makeup. That doesn’t mean that a Reformed Church couldn’t have, if they had the staffing and had the interest, a bilingual or a Spanish service. But I don’t think that enters their mind. Maybe someday it will, but at this point there’s more a feeling of well, you need to learn how to speak English so if we try to accommodate your Spanish, you’ll never learn English, which is a pretty limited view.

GR: Yes it is. Al, your heritage is Mexican-American, or were you born in Mexico?

AS: My wife was born in Mexico. I was born in Texas. It doesn’t change my heritage as far as being a Mexican.

GR: Your parents were born in Mexico?

AS: No, my parents were born in Texas, but they’re Mexican as well. But their parents were born in Mexico.

GR: And that’s where the connection comes from?

AS: Well, that’s who they are. They are Mexican in the sense of heritage-wise. But when you’re talking about country, we’re U.S. citizens, we’re Americans in that sense. I don’t really like to use the exclusivity title of American being United States people, because Canada is America, Mexico is America, South America is America.
We’re an American continent. Somehow there’s a feeling that because you’re a U.S. citizen you are the only American. I mean it is kind of synonymous. If you are American, you’re a U.S. citizen. That means you can’t be Mexican and be American, you can’t be South American and be American, obviously you are, or Canadian or be American.

GR: How would you refer to your heritage then?

AS: Mexican.

GR: Mexican-American?

AS: Well you could, Mexican-American, just to pinpoint the fact that you live in the United States. But as far as if somebody were to ask me what is your national heritage or background, I would say Mexican. There was a time when people wouldn’t want to say that because they would receive such negative feedback that they would usually say Spanish-American, which was more than far from the truth. Or you can say Texan or something (laughs).

GR: Now, you would say that you belong to the Hispanic culture or language group?

AS: Yes, but you know, again, Hispanic is a term that is kind of a social term. It is not a very personal term. You can put a lot of people in that group, and that’s convenient politically to put a lot of people in the group when they one thing in common mostly, and that’s the Spanish language. And even that varies. But there’s even subtle cultural differences. So even that changes. But Hispanic has been an acceptable political and census term to identify a group of people with those similarities. But if somebody were to ask me who I was and I’d say I’m Mexican, not in the sense that
I’m Mexican from Mexico, that I’m a Mexican patriot or a Mexican citizen, but in a sense that that’s where my heritage is.

GR: Do you see that heritage playing an important part in Holland today?

AS: In what sense?

GR: When you think of the Mexican population in Holland, is that an important part of Holland, that percentage of people in the community? Do they play an important role?

AS: I think they’ve played an important role historically because they’ve made Holland become economically successful. I think Holland is a very successful community in the sense that the economy is strong. But right now they’re having problems now with not having enough labor force for the opportunities that they have. I think Hispanics, or Mexican people, have filled those gaps repeatedly and continue to fill those gaps as the need goes out saying we need people to do these jobs. And they’re coming in, some illegal, but they’re still welcomed, and some obviously legal. Five years ago, when I was working in different agencies, people would ask us to help them get employees for the jobs that they had available. They had to speak English. If they couldn’t speak English, they didn’t want them. Now they’re asking me, "Hey bring me anybody. We don’t care if they speak English or not. We’ll deal with it. We’ll cope with it. We’ll handle it. We need them."

GR: Have you seen the employers bringing in bilingual supervisors or any other assistants to help those workers get along better in the factory that don’t speak English?

AS: Well, yes. That’s happening more and more, especially when they actually need
them. They need them more for their physical labor than their communication skills. But most places have had people there long enough that they put them in supervisory roles. I think the one that probably comes to mind is Bil-Mar. They have English classes there. People during their work hours will take classes. And the language that they learn is related to their work, which makes perfect sense because learning a language, if you can learn it in a concrete way that you can use those words everyday, makes sense. So you can develop your language skills from that point of view. But that’s what they’ve done because they feel that the minority population that they have at Bil-Mar is significant. They’re just not able to get the workforce to do the work they need them to do. They’ve made adjustments, that is, to accommodate those that don’t speak English at all.

GR: Do you think that becomes an attractive thing for people moving to the area, that aren’t strong English speaking people?

AS: I’m not so sure people really know that that’s going on until they get into the workforce. I think people have always come to this area trying to get some employment no matter where or how, legal or illegal (laughs). They do it because they know they can do the job and they’ll communicate any way that they can. Obviously, employers have safety concerns and liabilities. So they really need to know that they’re communicating. Hispanic workers will come and they will adapt and they will learn how to do the work very quickly. It’s just a matter of will the employer accept them not being able to communicate with them very well. But again, they’ve had enough Hispanics in this community that...(end of side one)
GR: Holland's diversity as far as ethnicities has been increasing over the past several years. Can you tell me a little bit about how this diversification has affected the community; has it changed it significantly? Other than making it economically strong which you talked about? I guess maybe I should ask, has it affected you dramatically, this increase in diversification, as a person?

AS: There used to be a time when I thought I knew every Hispanic in town, now I'm lucky if I knew who they are. There are so many people, at least of a Hispanic background. As far as Asian, I've had some interaction with Asian people through my work experience, but probably not enough. There hasn't been really that much opportunity for black interaction, with people who are African American, because there aren't that many. Historically there haven't been that many here in Holland. To me, the Upward Bound program, when I was involved in it, both as a student and as a director eventually of the program, we tried to mix them multiculturally, including blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and whites especially, and bring them all together. I always found that there was always this real special relationship that people developed as a result of people from different backgrounds. It just seemed to be a much closer, more cohesive group. I would hope that eventually something like that would happen in Holland. I think a lot of that depends on economic opportunity, in terms of where you can live, where you go to work, where you socialize. There hasn't been as much segregation in this community as you could find in other communities. But as more Hispanics are coming in, you are beginning to define more areas that are more concentrated with Hispanic people. But again, that's
economically driven. Where can you afford to live? Well, you can afford to live where the older housing is. When I was part of the Human Relations Commission, we had an effort of trying to get the city to have a very tough rental inspection program. What I saw as a director at that time was that rented housing was getting deteriorated very fast. People who owned the housing, which were doctors, lawyers, people who own factories, people with a lot of money, who own these rental just were not reinvesting in getting those up to code. But Hispanic people were living in them, because that's what they could afford to live in. But as they moved out, they weren't being repaired. So the downtown, especially in the old areas, they were starting to deteriorate more and more and more. You could see it as you drove by. My feeling at that point was that that's going to create racial tension in the community because these are the same neighborhoods where Dutch people lived for years. And of course, there's always the talk and reputation about Dutch having immaculate lawns, which I think there's a lot of truth to that. They owned most of the housing at that time, but now these people were now renting this housing. But some of these people still owned the housing, but they weren't investing back into them. So when people would come downtown and they would see the Hispanics living and they would see, "You see, the Hispanics are tearing the town down. They are the ones that are responsible for the deterioration." Well, deterioration takes place over a long time and these people don't live in these houses all the time. So that's why I was interested in getting a rental inspection program. It took us five years, politically, to get the city to buy into the rental inspection program. They
finally got the enforcement in and the program in, and we saw some gradual improvement of the housing stock in the community. Now we have special programs like the Community Improvement Center to help them fix up the house and the Paint Blitz and all these kinds of things that we do now because we understand that there’s an importance of people feeling good about the community in terms of its appearance and its quality of life.

GR: Has that been adopted by the new populations that have come in?

AS: What is that?

GR: Do they buy into the historically clean environment that Holland has provided?

AS: They’re doing that more and more because they see it around them and the expectations of them. That includes the people who own the rental housing, who the city now has expectations of them, that when somebody leaves it in immaculate condition or in a trash condition, if you’re going to own it and if you’re going to rent it, you’re going to bring it back up. Who you choose to rent in there is none of the city’s business. But the condition of the housing is the city’s business. It is the entire community’s business. Therefore, you choose to invest in property here, then you better maintain it. So with that attitude and expectation, I think the people who they choose now to live in those rental housing they are a little bit more careful because they don’t want to put more money into fixing it. So when you start having an attitude that you’re just going to bleed the housing stock for the money that you can get and not put nothing back in, you’re going to start getting people to move in there who will trash your house because they have no respect for the property because you
have no respect for the property. And it just is a cycle. It gets worse and it gets worse until finally they have to demolish the house. You’re really inviting that type of person, no matter who they are, because that’s what they can afford because nobody else wants to live there. That’s who’s going to live there, somebody who’s going to trash it. So it’s a vicious cycle. If you keep it up and it’s a good community and a good neighborhood, you’re going to have people. Once it’s vacated, they’re going to come in and say, "I want to live in this neighborhood because it’s clean, it appears to be safe, the house is maintained, and I want to live in good, clean, quality housing. This is what I can afford, but I’m willing to pay for it if my heater is going to work." (laughs) So it feeds on itself negatively, or it feeds on itself positively. I would hope that that’s the direction we’re going.

GR: How has the role of women changed in Holland since you arrived?

AS: Well, I think you can see the role of women changing quite a bit. They’re in council positions; they own their own businesses. Women are taking more leadership roles in the community. I think in the past, twenty, thirty years ago, maybe not even that long, women would take a lot of what you would call background positions, kind of supportive positions. Males were more dominant and more controlling. But I think women, in every level of society, they’re just moving into power positions, power positions of influence, power positions of respect. I think that’s happening both in the Hispanic community as well as the non-Hispanic community. I know that working for the city, I kind of picked up some feelings that some of the women felt very subservient. They were in the secretary positions. They were in the clerk positions.
They weren't expected to do much more than that. But they were good at what they did because they really felt that was their role. I don't have anything against that. It's just that as younger women were coming up through the system, it was important for those opportunities to be made available to them. And they have been. I think that civil rights laws have had a great impact on the equal employment opportunity. That includes women of all colors and backgrounds. I think white women especially have benefited from civil rights laws.

GR: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland and how did they affect you or the community? Do you remember anything that sticks in your mind that was really controversial?

AS: I guess there are a number of things. I suppose I could talk about one. It might be a little bit sensitive, but one that sticks out in my mind was during Tulip Time. You know they put out the special Tulip Time edition. It was the Sentinel from the previous owner, so it was not the Sentinel that's being run now, because they've changed over. They used to have a woman writer there that she contributed to an article that somebody did a feature on the Hispanic community. It was in this Tulip Time special edition that they sold at that was for a lot of money, 50 cents. That was maybe thirty years ago. But I remember when I looked through that special edition they had an article about the Hispanic community, and it read real well. It was moving real nice about the Hispanic community. Well all of a sudden, you could see that the writing style changed. The other half started talking more negatively. You're reading some very pleasant things and all of a sudden, boom, you hit some
negative stuff and it just keeps going. So you know somebody else added to that article. It turned out to be a feature writer there from the Sentinel. She basically came out and said, "If you think there are too many Hispanics here, well why don't you just open up the phone book and you can see how many Dutch people there are and that there aren't as many Hispanics as you think. And if they don't like it here, they can go back from where they came from." That's pretty much the exact words that she wrote in that article (laughs). I couldn't believe what I was reading. You know after a while people thinking that way are kind of in the past. Every now and then you still hear something (laughs) like that and you think it's more funny now than it used to be. Before it was very serious, and that they would write that in that article was just amazing to me, and that the Sentinel, as a newspaper in the community, would allow that to happen. There was this one advertisement that was also in the Sentinel. It was an advertisement for a shoe store in town. What they had was a big old fat Mexican with a torn up Mexican hat with revolutionary bullets across the chest, with some old gun and a machete on his side, shackles, hairy bony legs and stuff, and torn up clothes, and you could tell that the person was unshaven and dirty, and there were flies buzzing around him. It was supposed to be kind of a funny advertisement, like if you need some new shoes come to the shoe store. But you see all these images of the revolutionary, fat, unshaven, dirty, unclean, flies around him—you know just the images were so totally negative that it was not really funny in the sense that they were portraying a Mexican person that way. To me, I thought that was pretty outrageous that that kind of advertisement portraying an ethnic
group with all these negative stereotypes, violence being one of them, cleanliness being another, the fact that they had a ball and chain around their ankle. Somebody’s going to be in trouble with the law or in jail or whatever. Somebody might look at it as funny, but if you represent that ethnic group you look at it and say everything negative about me is presented to the community right here. And it’s ugly, because that’s what people really think. They apologized about it and everything. I think one of the issues that has come up and has come up repeatedly, and I think the Chamber of Commerce is probably more sensitive about it now, but it’s always been about presenting an image of the community: who is Holland? In the past there was not a hint that a minority person even existed in this community. It was always windmills, Dutch shoes, tulips, white people. Dutch people especially. When you open up the periodical, the magazine, or the literature that they would give out to attract industry into the community, there was not a sign of a minority person ever. I think when they came out with one issue one time a Hispanic group had threatened to picket the Chamber of Commerce during Tulip Time because they weren’t included in their periodical, at least showing that Hispanics were part of it. So what they ended up doing was including a full color photo of the Latin American Queen and the Court and the float that they put in the Tulip Time parade. They put that insert into their very expensive booklet. But they couldn’t understand why Hispanics were upset because they were left out of the community. I think since then they’ve been a little bit more accepting, a little bit more receptive, that if they’re going to show who the community is and what it’s about, they need to include everybody who lives here, not
just that it’s purely a Dutch community.

GR: So you think Tulip Time has become more multicultural in its present day form?

AS: Well, it has to some extent. At least, they’ve been more open to it. I appreciate the fact that it is a Dutch Tulip Time Festival, and you need to respect that and you need to go with that and you need to appreciate it as much as everybody else. There’s an opportunity to express pride and so forth, and I really have an appreciation for that. What the city of Holland used to have was a city government float, represented for the city of Holland, city employees and so forth. It was generally a windmill with tulips and city employees dressed in Dutch costumes. When I was working there, I decided the city of Holland is more than that. So as a city representing the whole community we ought to share. They can still have the tulips and they can still have the windmill on the float, but let’s put people on it that represent every culture in the community. So we had people from Dutch background, but we had people in their Mexican flocoric type dress and we had Indians with their head dress and we had Asian and we had blacks, people from African background. They were all on this float. It looked real pretty because of all the colors, and it got applause all the way down the parade route.

GR: So do you think the community, even though they might not admit it, is really a lot more accepting than they seem to be at times?

AS: The community as a whole is a lot more accepting. I think there are pockets and there are individuals that are not, and I think that’s true across the country, probably in some places more than others. But I think the community as a whole is more
accepting and I think it is a much more friendly environment.

GR: Of all the jobs you’ve had in Holland, is there one that you really like and one that you really didn’t liked? Any particular ones?

AS: Just about every job I’ve been in I liked. The one I liked the most was when I the director of the Human Relations Commission. I did that for a little more than twelve years. That one was with basically enforcing civil rights laws for the state and federal government but at the local level. So I was involved with employment issues across the board in the community, education, consumer, every housing issue. I was involved with the entire community in every aspect of the community. So I got to know a lot of people, all the CEOs, all the presidents, all the power base for the community. From the president of a company to a person working on the factory line, I would know them, because most of the people who would bring problems to me and I would have to try to resolve them, and sometimes it would involve meeting with CEOs. I liked that job because everyday was so different. You deal with housing issues and you deal with, like I said, education issues. Some issues were more complex than others at certain times, but they were all very interesting. It helped me develop, at least helped me understand or get a good grasp and image of what this community was about, being in every niche and corner. I enjoyed that job the most, although I also worked hardest at that and it was one more than one person could handle. So I think for my own sanity I had to leave it, as much as I hated to. But I really appreciated the time that I was able to, I felt, contribute to the community as well as have a job. It was a good job for me, but it was very stressful too.
GR: So you never really had one that you hated?

AS: Well, yes I did, come to think of it. It just flashes into my mind. I really didn’t hate it because of the job itself. I just hated it for what it did to you. I worked at Herman Miller. That’s a great place to work, but I hated the job that I did because it was a factory job. I was on chair assembly. Everything that I could think about my life flashed within at least a couple of days, but then I didn’t have nothing to think about anymore. It wasn’t a challenge. It wasn’t stimulating. I had to spend 10 to 12 hours assembling chairs, working with fiberglass and stuff. Day in and day out it just seemed so no day was different than any other day. It was so mechanical and I felt like I was dying there (laughs). I lasted five weeks.

GR: How old were you when you took that job?

AS: I was about 21, 22.

GR: So you were young.

AS: Yes, I was still fairly young.

GR: Did you go to college before or after that incident?

AS: I went to Hope two years before I had that job. Then I went to Michigan State after I that job.

GR: You got your Bachelor’s from Hope?

AS: No, I got my Bachelor’s from Michigan State University.

GR: So you transferred?

AS: Right, transferred. So I had that job in between, because Hope College was saying that I had run up a bill and I had to pay my bill before I went back. But they gave
me an opportunity I couldn’t pass up at Michigan State with Teacher Core, which
they would pay for your tuition and they would give you a stipend.

GR: You can’t turn that down.

AS: No I couldn’t turn that down. So as far as an employment experience, that was for
me, a dehumanizing experience because it just didn’t allow me to think, with the
exception of how to put the chairs together (laughs). I don’t think I’ve ever been in a
factory job ever since. But what really motivated me to go to college, at least part of
the motivation, was I used to work at the Western Foundry, early around the time I
was graduating from high school, tipping molds over in the hot heat and stuff and
dirty. You could work there for an hour and a half and you felt like you’d been
working there all day. You’d go home all dirty and tired and everything, and you
really didn’t accomplish anything. I would remember going home and just mumbling
to myself, I got to go to school. I can’t do this the rest of my life.

GR: So it was a great motivator for you, the manual labor jobs?

AS: Oh, yes. It was a great motivator because money was not the end factor for me, that
would come. That was not a motivation for me to get a job. My motivation for a
job was what I did while I was working.

GR: Enjoy it.

AS: Yes. I didn’t want to feel like my life was wasting before my eyes and only the
weekends to think that I had some time to myself.

GR: Or think about Monday.

AS: Yes. Or think about, "Oh, Monday’s coming. I got to go back."
GR: Talking about your high school days, with your age being a lot more advanced now than then, not a lot, but...

AS: ...Plenty.

GR: Is there a generation gap in your eyes that exists in Holland?

AS: I guess there's always a generation gap, but I think the generation that I grew up was so radical that this generation is probably much more less radical, much more subtle. So I think that my generation is just looking for this generation to blow up like we did way back when, in terms of being the way that society was at those times when people reacted. But my experience is that there is a generation gap, but it's not as drastic as when I grew up.

GR: You think so?

AS: Yes. At least from my experience, I just feel that I can adjust to the changes much easier. I don't know. Obviously, change is much more rapid as the years go by, and I think that people in my generation are more used to the change. I think people in my generation wanted change to take place faster than people wanted it to happen. Now it's taking place whether you want it to happen or not. So I think that we are able to adjust to change more than the generation before me or before us, because that generation wanted to keep everything the same. They want to move forward as fast. In a sense, technology is creating more of a generation gap; that's true. Because people of my generation aren't really as tuned into the technological aspects. As kids are growing up in schools, they are growing up with technology, and they are looking forward to the change of technology. We're dreading the change of technology.
GR: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life?

AS: Yes, there are lots of them, but I think one in particular was when I was in high school and was part of the Mexican American Youth Organization. That’s when the Chicano movement was taking place in the southwest and then kind of slowly moved this way. That was the first time that I began to feel, or began to understand who I was, that being Mexican was nothing to be ashamed of, but something to be proud of, to be, not radical, but to be forceful about it and not shy away from it in a sense. But also that made me feel much more confident in who I am and what I could do. I could just feel an emotional change going over me, having a real sense of identity. I think that as a young person, I experienced being pulled so much by my culture and the culture out there in terms of knowing English and not knowing Spanish, at least not to speak it very well, but I could understand it; not being proud of what I represented, what my culture had to offer; feeling ashamed of who I was; trying to be different; trying to be better, but at the same time at the expense of who I was. I think finally, just a discovery of myself and gaining a new sense of self-esteem just changed everything. I saw everything differently and I did things, I think, in a much more positive way, and less fearful too. Part of that Mexican American Youth Organization was to help other young people see the same thing I saw and to help them create an identity that was common with mine, but they just didn’t understand it at that time until we could share and be positive about it. I really felt that it just had a great impact on the kids and the people that I interacted with at that time.
GR: Was there a particular person that made you aware of this feeling?

AS: Yes. His name was Chic Garsez. He was the president of the _______________. At that time, it was part of the Chicano movement in the sense that they were trying to develop a sense of political identity and to say that Mexican people need to get involved in the community, and get involved more politically, and they need to go vote, they need to run for offices, and they need to challenge the system. They need to do it from a Mexican perspective. So he kind of helped me along with getting this Mexican American Youth Organization started.

GR: He is a local person?

AS: Yes, well he was also from Austin, Texas, but he’s probably been here as long as my parents have been here. I haven’t seen him in a long time.

GR: Is he still living in Holland?

AS: No, I think he’s in Texas again. But I remember that he kind of pretty much took me under his wing in the sense that the things he was saying I was really attracted to. It really opened my eyes and it motivated me to move forward in that direction.

GR: Have your priorities changed over the course of your life in Holland?

AS: My priorities in what sense?

GR: Have they changed in any ways from high school days to today? Do you do things differently because of what you’ve experienced?

AS: Well, when I was very young, I used to feel, like I mentioned before, that I was no different than anyone else and that I was accepted anywhere I went. But then I kept experiencing areas in which that wasn’t true, but I wouldn’t accept them. When they
didn’t accept me, I just made excuses for that and just ignored it. I came to realize that I was really being discriminated against, not because of me as an individual, but me who I represented. I didn’t really wake up to that probably until I was in high school sometime and then reflected back on those situations and began to realize that everybody else could do this and do that, like including employment or be part of Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts or whatever. They could be part of that, but I couldn’t because I finally realized that it was how they saw me as a Mexican who really they didn’t want. In a sense, that hurt quite deeply. When I realized that, I began to feel angry. That’s when I tried to do something about it in a sense of deal with it. As I grew older and got involved with the Human Relations Commission and got to enforce the civil rights laws, that allowed me to do something about it and it was legal (laughs). So that was important for me. I’ve always grown up in a situation where I’ve always been in a position to help somebody else in some way or fashion. My jobs have always been in that line. I don’t think I’ve taken any jobs since I’ve been a professional that has not really taken that kind of a direction. I still believe that, so that hasn’t changed, my professional career goals, haven’t change in the sense that I want to be in a position to be of help to people and to make some significant changes that will make a positive contribution, not only to their individual life, but also in the community as a whole. That’s still important to me. I’ve always thought that at some time I’d want to be rich, you know financially, but there’s nothing that I can see that I can do, outside of winning the lotto, that would allow me to become rich (laughs), unless I wanted to go into business or sales or something like that. But I
also realize about me, that I'm not a very good salesman. It's important for me to understand that. But I'm a good salesperson in the sense that I can sell something that's good for someone that has no personal gain for me. If it has benefit for someone else and I can help make that happen, then to me that's important. So I pretty much have stuck with that. I don't think that's going to make me rich, not that I can tell (laughs). Even if I were rich, I wonder how I would deal with it. I know that I would deal with a lot of situations and again, I want to help other people make a better life for themselves and so forth.

GR: Is there anything else you wanted to add before we end the tape?

AS: Well, I have some children obviously. One's in college and one's in high school, and they're both doing real well. I guess I'd like to have them feel good about remaining in this community and be accepted, and hopefully things will change enough that they wouldn't feel any different than anyone else.

GR: That's the end of the tape with Al Serrano.