Fierro, Andres S Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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Interview with Andres Fierro
Interviewed by Joseph O'Grady, 1990

JO: When did you first arrive in Holland?

AF: I came to Holland in about 1955. My parents came up basically to be around my grandmother, we came up as migrants and worked the fields and so forth. My father got a factory job, and my mother and family continued to work the fields.

JO: Where was your first place of residence in the city?

AF: We lived with my grandmother down in the dead end of Fairbanks, which would be north side of 8th Street. There's a dead end down there. The house is no longer there. Then from there we moved just around the corner in the same area. We stayed there for a good 20 years.

JO: Was there a neighborhood established in the area?

AF: Yes, it was a neighborhood, but it was kind of a neighborhood where nobody went down because it was a dead end. There was no reason, unless people lived there, or friends. So it wasn't a high visible neighborhood. I remember there was a small little landfill, a dump, basically a garbage dump that was about a block away. There really wasn't too much traffic down there which was nice as us kids were growing up.

JO: Do you remember what your neighbors were like? Were they Hispanic? Were they white?

AF: A little bit of everything. In fact, we were that little pocket or section that was the Federal School district. When I graduated from Federal School, which went up to the eight grade at that time, I think there were like eight boys in my class and some girls. Of the eight boys, I think one or two of them were white, the rest of us were
Hispanic. So we were a kind of a pocket of Hispanic families. Around that neighborhood, around those blocks, it was very diverse. It was a lot of southern whites and Hispanics were down there. It was a mixture. It wasn't an upperclass neighborhood. It was probably, you would say more of a lower class, economically lower class.

JO: Was the condition of the neighborhood fairly good?

AF: Not really, as far as being compared to the rest of the city. I would say that was the poorer side of the town. For us it was good, but comparatively speaking, I would say it wasn't a high class neighborhood.

JO: Where did you originally come from?

AF: I originally came from Big Spring, Texas, which is really about the heart of Texas.

JO: What's the closest big city around there?

AF: Probably about 200 miles southwest of the Dallas/Fort Worth area. If you draw a straight line from Dallas/Fort Worth to El Paso, Texas, right smack dab in the middle of the two is Big Spring, Texas.

JO: Was it an urban or rural area?

AF: It was more of an urban area. In fact, part of the reason why my parents wanted to leave that area was because it was getting fairly violent. So they made some moves for us for education and for our safety, to be by family. So there was a lot of reasons for the move up here, for leaving Texas.

JO: How many people came with you from Texas?

AF: When we came, it was our family, my parents, my two brothers, my sister, and
myself. However, we had been up here a couple times before. My grandmother had already settled here and some aunts and uncles had settled here. In the Hispanic community, there's extended family. I'm not sure how they're related, so there were other family members had already been here. They were part of the drawing attraction. It was more than just our immediate family. There was others that had come here also.

JO: How old were you when you first arrived in Holland?

AF: I was, I think, about four or five years old. I hadn't started school yet.

JO: Were you the youngest out of everybody?

AF: No, there was a younger sister and a younger brother. In fact, my youngest brother was born in Texas and he was still an infant, he was still nursing when we came to Holland.

JO: Can you remember why your family decided to come to Holland?

AF: Again, it was for different reasons. To be by family, my dad says to give us an education. A big reason was that this was a nice community. Economics had a lot to do with it.

JO: Was there problems in Big Spring, Texas, at that time?

AF: Yes, the economy was not that great, as far as I know. In fact, right now, family that are still around Big Spring said that Big Spring was pretty much a ghost town. Houses are up for sale left and right because there is no economy there. Again, because of the urban setting that was getting to be pretty violent. They just wanted to get away. Basically my parents did that for the sake of us, their children.
JO: What was your first job in the city?

AF: It was probably picking blueberries. It's hard, because we picked blueberries, apples, cherries, strawberries, pickles—anything that grew, we picked. When the harvest season wasn't in, we were weeding.

JO: So did you start in the fields when you were five years old?

AF: Yes, basically.

JO: How old were you when you finally got out of the fields?

AF: I think I was about a freshman in high school, but then in my senior year I was able to be paid by the hour...some friends of family had a farm, or at least managing a farm, and they gave me a job as a kind of the straw boss. So I basically went back and worked in the fields again my senior year. So I first got out of the fields when I was like a freshman in high school. I think I was a dishwasher or something like that. But since grade school, I picked, I always worked the fields and even afterwards still continued.

JO: What was your first professional job or career, employment?

AF: I don't know if you consider musician a career, or maybe more the question, if it's employment. [laughter] After high school, I was involved with music quite a bit, even during high school. We travelled the country, did music, played all of the bars, rock festivals, and all of that stuff. I went through a conversion in 1970, and even then I was involved with Christian rock music. We travelled the country and so forth, so that was my full-time career for about five years. I'd find odd jobs through Manpower when we came back. Musician was first, and then after that, what did
happen? I was a bilingual aide at the West Ottawa Middle School for two years. If you want a definition, first a musician, then it was bilingual aide.

JO: Where are you employed now and what position do you hold?

AF: I'm a minister in the Reformed Church. I'm pastor of Crossroad Chapel here in Holland. Crossroad Chapel is the Hispanic Ministries of the Classis of the Reformed Church in Holland. Basically my job is to start a Hispanic worshipping congregation.

JO: How long have you been a minister overall, and how long have you been a minister at the Crossroad Chapel?

AF: I've been in ministry now for eight or nine years. The first three years of ministry after graduating from seminary I was working for the First United Methodist Church here in Holland as Minister of Hispanic Outreach. It was after the three years that the Reformed Church called me to continue this ministry here at Crossroad Chapel.

JO: Did you attend any school in Holland?

AF: Yes. I attended the West Ottawa Public School system and graduated from West Ottawa High School in 1968. I was out of school for seven years, and I went back to college which was Hope College. That was out of convenience because my parents didn't help me with any of it, any educational costs or anything. I graduated from Hope in 1979 and then I went to Western Seminary here in town and graduated in 1982.

JO: What were your impressions of the public school system in Holland when you first started out?

AF: That's a difficult question because when I first started out, I tried to become part of
JO: As you moved along in it, what were your impressions?

AF: As a kid you’re pretty much naive and impressionable. I remember just when I was first starting school, I didn’t know much English. I depended on my older brother who was only two years older than I was to kind of show me the ropes in the school system. As a kid, you really don't know what is happening. It’s not until after you get out and begin to find who you are that you begin to reflect and say, "Ah, these were the good things and these were the bad things." As a kid, you really don’t stop and think this is good and this is bad, you just kind of live through it. I guess that’s a survival mechanism, I’m not sure. By God’s grace, that’s how we're made. I look back and I remember teachers reprimanding me for speaking with an accent. I remember good role models of teachers who were very supportive, very encouraging, very caring. I remember teachers that were the other extreme also, that had no patience, that would single us out for as far as needing to wash our hair or take a bath, those kind of things. As a kid, you grow up very self conscious of those impressions. So those were my impressions as a young kid which formed my own self identity, and how I kind of developed some survival mechanisms to just develop in the school system. My high school experience was great, maybe because I was a musician at that point and an athlete and those were the only two things that kept me in school. I didn’t have good grades, but I didn’t cause any trouble. I just kind of lived my life without getting in anybody’s way and nobody got in my way. I wasn’t a student, I just stayed in school to be in sports and did enough studying to stay eligible.
JO: Did you receive any bilingual education when you were living here?

AF: No, none at all. It was just to get thrown in there and learn to survive.

JO: Do you think that was a positive experience or a negative experience?

AF: That's hard to say because those were times, that's just the way it was. I guess if you're asking me which would I prefer, I would prefer bilingual education mainly because at that time you just do what you have to do and kids are quick to learn another language. But I look back, and for one who has gone through the school system and especially who has grown up in this town, I have to really deal with a lot of personal kind of scars and personal identity that I believe was robbed from me because I was not even asked who I was. It was just an assumption that I would be like everybody else. To me, a lot of things I didn't come to terms with until I was in ministry.

JO: How much English did you know when you first arrived in Holland?

AF: From what I remember, I didn't know hardly any at all. I remember asking my brother in Spanish what does this mean, what that word meant, and so forth. As kids, you catch on real quick. Then it got to the point where my parents would speak in Spanish and we would respond in English. I really lost 99 percent of my language going through the school system here. Somehow there was this idea that knowing one language is better than knowing two languages. As kids you just become victims. You can't evaluate that as a kid.

JO: Did your parents know much English when they first arrived?

AF: No, very little. In fact, I remember we used to have to translate for them when they
would go to the store. We would interpret questions and any kind of transactions.

JO: What do you exactly mean by "robbed of your language"? Did you lose your ability to speak Spanish, and did you have to try to relearn it later on?

AF: Yes, that's part of being robbed of my language. It's more a part of being robbed of identity. Language is not just knowing the words and how to put phrases together. I'm really finding that language is an expression of what one is. It's how you perceive the world, and when you're told that to speak another language is a sign of ignorance, you begin to be very self conscious of what your roots are. When there is no acknowledgement in the community or in the school systems of your own heritage, of your own culture, of your own sense of roots, you really become a man without a home. You begin to wonder do you belong? And if you belong, where do you belong? Because there is no acknowledgement of your identity. Those are a lot of things that you don't really understand until after you've grown up and you come to terms of who you are. That there is a whole lot of baggage in that one.

JO: What were your first impressions of the city, or first impressions that you can remember when you arrived?

AF: Good town. In fact, I want to stay here, and I intentionally made efforts to stay here because I think it's a great place to raise a family. Part of that was my parents' decisions and identified with this town having some great things to offer. It was a good town. It was a quiet town. It was a clean town. There was something about it that was very peaceful. I think it still has a lot of those qualities that's very attractive to raising a family. I want the best for my kids and I think this is part of giving them
the best.

JO: Do your impressions ever change over time?

AF: Yes. I think a lot of it is a better understanding of the community, but also a better understanding of oneself and a better understanding of the issues. What I feel is best for my children is not so much just having silence or not to address the issues or to rob them of their identity. But the best for my kids is to have them find out exactly who they are and them feel a real sense that they belong here, they have a right to be here, and they have a right to their own identity. Somehow, and this is still part of the struggle here, is that diversity does not necessarily mean being divided. Diversity is good, and I try to teach my kids that. The struggle is still here, that at one time the peacefulness and the quietness was a very attractive thing. Now sometimes it becomes very frustrating because rather than to deal with the issues openly and honestly. Silence tends to be a very... well, we won't deal with it, and if we don't talk about it, it won't exist. That becomes an illusion of peace rather than a real, and actually come to terms with it. I firmly believe that if you don't understand the community, you're not going to be able to offer any kind of solutions. Because I've grown up here, and I think I've come to terms with what I've gone through, I feel it's my Christian obligation to offer some solutions in a real kingdom kind of perspective. It's a very complex kind of question and answer.

JO: Do you ever encounter any major problems in Holland? Were you ever physically intimidated by a non-Hispanic?

AF: Oh yes, as kids, you grew up, that was just the kind of way of life, being identified as
the Spics, where the majority of the time you couldn't date certain people because you were the Mexican in the community. That's part of your development and your self identity and self worth. There's always the racial slurs and attitudes. Kids pick them up from the parents. Even now, you still encounter the racial slurs. You still encounter the people that just speak out of ignorance and still expect you to speak English because this is America, and people just say, "When are you going back?"

I'm a runner and I'm sometimes on the streets. You get the people, because they're safe behind their car, they can scream those things. You know, "Go back to Mexico where you belong." Those kinds of things that they're free to say exactly what they're thinking because they don't have to confront me in a very personal way. I don't know if you've read the paper today, but they're having problems with the Border Patrol. We believe they single out Hispanics because of the nature of their language, their culture, their hair, or the texture of their skin and so forth. It's become a very physical kind of discrimination. So it's still there, but the thing is that because people have come here, have grown up here, and have come to understand the community and have been educated through the system that in a sense has not understood them, that we're able to deal more directly with the system and be able to deal more directly on what I call, "on your terms," on the terms of the dominant society that we can deal on those terms. That way we're able to be heard.

JO: Were you personally ever discriminated against any time while living in Holland?

AF: Well, I think discrimination takes on so many various forms. Discriminated against, yes, because I was not allowed to speak my language in school. Discriminated
against, yes, because of certain attitudes and expectations, call them stereotypes.

Discriminated against, yes, because I was forced to keep my circle of friends to a very select few, only those who would accept me for who I was. You could say well that applies to everybody, but there's a difference when that application is made because of the color of your skin or the language that you speak. But discriminated against, to me that's such an elusive word because people say, "hey we don't make you drink out of only certain drinking fountains or use certain kind of rest rooms or sit at the counter", but there is more of a different kind of attitude that forces you to deny and kind of restricts you from really living your life to the fullness of satisfying your identity. That's a tough question because I don't want to say that all of life is full of discrimination. Like I said, there's a lot of good things about this town. But there's a lot of things that still need to be changed.

JO: Do you ever feel any racial tension in Holland? Was there ever civil rights movement in the '60s or '70s within the Hispanic community?

AF: I believe the black civil rights movement which I think you're referring to, it takes on a different flavor because of the civil rights or the black history here in America. The Hispanic community is, I think people know more about black history than they know about the Hispanic history. I believe that there is racial tension and there has always been racial tension. It's fluctuated and I think it's on the increase again but again I believe that because of education, because of getting people in key positions, because of being able, to in a sense unite in a common cause that now that we have those things in a sense of education, that we can deal with the system. I believe a civil
rights movement, or whatever the term would be, is possible, is dawning. My personal feeling because the piece of the pie is getting smaller and smaller all of the time, economically, politically, socially, that people are going to start fighting for what they feel is rightfully theirs.

JO: So are you saying that there hasn't been a civil rights movement per se in Holland 'till this date, but it's coming?

AF: Right, I believe so. I think people have been articulating their rights, their civil rights, but see, to me it's not so much that we come together and articulate our rights. It's more to get the ear of the dominant culture to say it's a civil rights movement. It's like it was Malcom X, King, and other leaders, Andrew Young that got the ear of the dominant community and somehow began to recognize that they were fighting for a cause. Their cause was not a black issue but a civil rights issue, something that was very basic to what everybody wanted, the pursuit of happiness and so forth, the constitutional rights. The common ground became, because the dominant community can't identify with blacks or Hispanics, and the dominant community here has not been ready to come to terms to identify with Hispanic community yet. That's what's frustrating, that there is still a lot of indifference, and while people are looking for apartheid, we're dealing with apathy. It's a lot harder to address the issue of apathy than it is to deal with the issue of apartheid. Again, a lot of the frustration is that, again, we have people that are educated and are in key positions that they are trying to express a sentiment, and it falls on deaf ears, that individuals are carrying a heavy burden to try to communicate not only with the Hispanic community but with the
dominant.

JO: In your opinion, how can the Hispanic community get the ear the dominant Dutch-Anglo community here in Holland? What could they do?

AF: That's a tough question. To me it's a political question, I guess. In many ways, and many times we've tried different things, part of them, some have tried to be very accommodating to the dominant community. Some have gotten very angry and very militant. Again, out of political process, you learn to be more of a strategist. That you follow a certain strategy to be political, to be polite, to be accommodating, but yet you never compromise on your principle. I'm not sure; that's a tough question.

Sometimes, to tell you the truth, I fluctuate back and forth. Sometimes I get so frustrated which I'm at that point right now, of how systems move. Not even with the system or rules or regulations, but the apathy of people, unable to grasp an understanding that there are other perspectives and that somehow the law and the media begins to be manipulated and to make everything seem that everything's okay when everything's not okay. Sometimes you have to really be sensitive to the issues that there's a time to be angry, there's a time to be patient. The thing is that we have to get our cues from the community because one person cannot be the sole spokesperson, but yet we have to get our cues from the dominant community if they're able and willing to listen, and also be a student of the political system and the processes to make, what people you have to contact, and what people you use to find a new interpretation of a law. We've discovered a new interpretation to the constitutional rights, through the civil rights movement for blacks, those kinds of
things, and the feminist movement. It's not so much the letter of law, but it's how you've been applying, the application of that law.

JO: What does the Hispanic community offer to Holland and what has it offered to Holland in the past?

AF: I think there's a lot of good things in the Hispanic community. First of all, I think there should be, and I think often times there's not, I think there's a good reminder to the Dutch community of what it is to be an immigrant, what it is to be somebody who has come here out of a necessity, out of some sense of personal identity in the freedom to worship, to work, to establish. I think there's a lot of similarities that people should just sit down and look at them between the settlement of the Dutch and the influx of the Hispanic community. I think, also is that the Hispanic community has a very, very high value to a sense of family. I think, especially in a time in our age when families are struggling so much that I think the Hispanic community has a lot to offer in that area of caring for the elderly, of extended family, of caring for the young ones. There's no such thing as generational separation, it's always been intergenerational. That is I think part of the healing that has to go on in the families for the overall community. Just the whole sense of allowing people to be diverse, from music, to language, to art, to dance, to culture. Those kind of things helps people to realize that the world is not homogeneous. The world is diverse and there is some real beauty in that whole concept, especially for such a highly religious town that, again to grasp the idea that diversity should not be threatening. The sad thing about this whole thing, and speaking as a pastor too, is that Sunday is still the most
segregated hour of the week. So it's a challenge. It's a challenge not just to the community, but I would say more so for the church. I believe if it doesn't happen in the church, it's not really going to happen.

JO: Do you see the Hispanic community as saving the moral fiber of Holland?

AF: Well, not necessarily. I think there is good and there is bad. I think the Hispanic community has a lot of good to offer like every other group, there's a lot of things that need to be corrected so I think, if anything, the presence of the Hispanic community, and I will say that also of the Asian population who have now settled here, especially in the '80s, the blacks who began to come in a little bit more freely. I don't know if they're saving moral fiber, but at least the context allows our moral ethics, our moral character to be applied in a very practical way rather than in isolation and in theory, just because it allows us to find out what we're made of.

JO: Sort of a more open, diverse way of seeing things.

AF: Yes. You can deal with it in theory, but until you sit down and have a Hispanic move in next to you as your neighbor, you really never know how you're going to react. Diversity allows us to find out what we're made of. Too often I don't think we have the courage to find out what we're made of. That's the true testing ground of finding out. Until a Hispanic truly moves in next door to me, or really truly begins to take out my daughter or go out with my son, then I'm going to find out whether the things I really believe are the things that really govern my life.

JO: What organizations do you belong to within the Hispanic community and Holland itself as a whole?
AF: That's a tough one. I've gone through phases of heavy involvement, and then you get frustrated and burned out and wrung out, and hung out to dry. [laughter] And then you __________ backed out. I went through some real physical exhaustion there for awhile. I'm very active in the school system. I'm the chair of the Hispanic Bilingual Migrant Advisor Committee. That has kept me very busy. I was part of forming a group called Justice Fellowship which was initially created to help people under Immigration Reform Control Act of 1986 to help ________ in amnesty, they've been here undocumented in the country. I've been involved with different groups. The thing for me, is not as so much even that they're Hispanic groups because I think they need to be present, Hispanic presence is a reminder to the dominant community to be involved in other community groups. I'm with Youth for Christ right now. I'm the Juvenile Court Advisor Committee to Judge Mark Fein, working at a day care center, Chair Committee Action House Board, Human Relations Commission, Police Commission. I'm trying to get a little bit more involved now with Habitat for Humanity, which is beginning to be established in town. Yes, I've been involved a lot over the past five, six years. I'm sure I'll go through more fluctuation of being really involved to backing away to being involved again. A lot of it is timing. If anything it is timing, that's what made history, historical events significant. It's not just the person but the timing.

JO: What would you really like to see changed in Holland?

AF: What would I like see changed in Holland? That's a tough one. [pause] Very little as far as what the community is offering. It's just attitudes. I think a real honest attempt
to be what the community professes to be, I think changing the apathy and
indifference. I speak from the position of a pastor, is to have a kingdom concept and
a kingdom mindset about not only the church, but of the community itself, to find that
there truly can be inclusiveness in our political system, in our educational system, in
our churches, that truly we can be inclusiveness in our understanding of why things
are the way they are and why they need to be changed. I don't know if I'm
answering your question because, like you said, there are so many good things about
this community, but they sometimes seem to overshadow the real attitudes.

JO: Underlying.

AF: Yes, that people pretend that certain things don't exist. That's frustrating.

JO: What do most Hispanics want changed? Do they agree with your views or do they have a different view of what they want changed?

AF: Yes. I can't speak for all Hispanics. It all depends on which Hispanic you talk to and which issue is current. You talk to, if we're talking about say, education, there are things that have to be changed in a very concrete way. A stronger emphasis on bilingual education to teachers being more understanding with their attitudes about Hispanics, or even Asians, or blacks, or whatever. It depends on which person you talk to.

JO: What do most Hispanics want changed?

AF: I don't know, I guess my feeling is that if you could change the attitude, in a lot of ways you could change the behavior. I think if it wasn't for attitudes, a lot of the issues would not be issues at all. If it wasn't for the attitude of indifference, it would
be easier to sit down at a table of communion and understanding and say, "Okay, these are the problems," and to walk away saying, "We have been heard." But it's indifference and apathy. To me that's the bottom line. We can change laws and force people to behave differently, but if their heart doesn't follow it, as soon as they get a chance, they're going to change the laws right back. That's my feeling. Again, I don't speak for the whole Hispanic community. I speak from a position of a pastor that believes in reconciliation. Reconciliation was not something that was handed down, but is something that is mutually discovered.

JO: What do you see for the future of Holland and its Hispanic community?

AF: Do you want the bright side or the dark side first? [laughter]

JO: We'll go with the positive side first.

AF: The positive side? I really see that there are some really strong leaders or people that are really astute, that are sensitive to the community, that are going to rise up. I think the school system has already proven that it has the capacity to nurture and to encourage and to develop some real excellent skills in youth. This is an excellent school system. There's no doubt about it. A lot of things are being improved, but comparatively it is an excellent school system. I think the positive is that somehow this community is going to be a model in a lot of ways to the rest of the state, to other communities that are going through the same thing. By that I mean that they're going to learn from our mistakes but also to realize that because of this sense of excellence here, that people are going to be able to discern and really focus and articulate the... process or the development. We have some great resources here, there's no doubt
about that. There's some great resources here. So that's the bright side. I guess if you're talking about mutual growth and mutual development and mutual benefit, that's the best here. Because economically, this town is very strong. That's going to be a real plus. Do you want the dark side now?

JO: Yes, the dark side.

AF: I personally see that within the next ten to fifteen years, again, the piece of the pie is getting smaller. The people are getting more desperate to hold on to what they have, whether it be financially, politically, socially, that people are going to fight harder to keep what they have.

JO: Is this the Hispanic community fighting?

AF: No, this is everybody. The piece of the pie is getting smaller and the Hispanics are not going to want to regress in what they have accomplished and I believe that the dominant community is not going to want to let go of anything they have because that's going to be in a sense a regression for them; financially, politically, socially, whatever. Racism is on the rise again. That the division between cultures is going to be even more and more acute. The division between cultures and the sense of identity is going to be even more painful. Everything is going to be more violent.

JO: Within Holland?

AF: Yes, I do. I do, I believe it's going to be more violent. Part of that is because of growth. Part of that is because of the growth there is going to be less and less opportunity to affect and influence people who are desperate. So, I see that point.

JO: What degree of violence are you talking about?
AF: I would say gangs. Gang violence in the schools. I would say that there would be a rise in even anger by the people because they have grown impatient. Impatient with the indifference. I'm not saying that this is going to be everybody, I'm saying that somehow there are going to be these little brush fires that are going to happen which were never recognized before. That is because the Hispanic leaders have the right not to speak for everybody. In a sense they're going to have the same problems as the dominant community. The mayor does not speak for all white people, for all Dutch people. He can't control what happens down on 5th street as opposed to what happens out in Holland Heights. Somehow the same thing is going to begin to happen with the Hispanic community in a more magnified way. People are going to be more angry and express it in certain manners. We will not have the privilege of having control over these things, although some people would expect that. That's not a luxury that we're going to have.

JO: You mentioned before other communities are going to have the same, or are at the same growth rate Holland's at, and they're going to be looking at Holland to see how Holland handles its problems and they'll do the same. Can you just name some of these communities?

AF: Well, you know, I think it's just natural that Hispanic populations are estimated to be the largest minority group by 1990. All ready Detroit has had reporters over here doing articles on Holland because racial wise, Hispanic to Anglo, Holland has the highest percentage ratio wise of Hispanics in the population in the state of Michigan, even more than Detroit, even more than Saginaw. Pound for pound. What happens
is that, it puts together a real strange or interesting dynamic. People are going to see how we deal with problems. People are going to see how we develop a political process to be heard. People are going to be, even with the educational system we're part of the Hispanic bilingual agenda. The state has always been very impressed with how well this...

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AF: As I was saying, even the state has been very impressed with how active and involved we have been. They hold this area of the city as a model for everybody else in the state. A small community like this will outshine areas with much greater populations. I think a lot of it has to do with networking, the development of leaders, people that are, in a sense, specialists in cross cultural areas. I think people are going to look to Holland saying, "What have you done right and what have you done wrong," as their testimony.

JO: Thank you very, very much Mr. Fierro.

JO: Interview with Andy Fierro, number two. Basically I just want you to recall the incident that you had with the Border Patrol, when it was approximately and what actually happened.

AF: The incident with the Border Patrol is, to me it's just one of those things where I know I can take care of myself, but it's significant mainly as to what has happened to others in this community. It was about a year and a half ago that I was with
somebody in court, in the District Court here in Holland, and I had been with him through the court process and we were standing outside of the courthouse, between the police department and the courthouse there's a courtyard there. We were standing out there discussing some of the results of that hearing. At that point I noticed the Border Patrol officers coming out of the police department and were heading in the opposite direction towards the main street. Because I knew the Border Patrol was in town, I recognized them right away. I did notice as they came out, people were going into the police department. The next I noticed they were out of sight, but then they came back towards in our direction. At that point, people were coming out of the courtyard, or courthouse, and they didn't stop anybody coming in any direction but went directly to myself and the other person, who was also Hispanic. They basically just asked us where we were born. At that point because I personally had some other business to take care of and I was with a person, and I thought that was a private priority, I just politely answered their question and that's basically all they did at that point. To me, like I said, the reason that's significant was mainly because people are being stopped mainly because of their nature, the color of their skin or their ethnic background. Again, I was aware enough to realize there were people who weren't Hispanic that were coming into the police department and coming out of the courthouse that they did not ask that very same question. So it is significant mainly because it is evidence of discrimination. It's evidence that they singled us out and evidence that, to me it's an abuse. What it is, is developing a second class citizenry? Is that a word? Or a citizen, that is susceptible to be stopped mainly by the nature
and the character of who they are as opposed to any other reason. So to me that carries a big important role in this community because if one person in one group is allowed to be treated differently by any other group, to me that makes a big statement as far as what, how our values, how our rights are protected.

JO: This happened at Holland Courthouse?

AF: Yes, Holland, here in Holland.

JO: How long did they prevent you from going about your daily business? Was it a long time?

AF: No, it was very short mainly because I think, I was born in Texas and raised in Texas, and the other person was born in Zeeland. It wasn't a long stay, however to me it's just the discriminating action that is significant. To me it makes no difference, like I said I can handle myself. I know that I can handle myself within the system. The problem is that there are too many people that are being stopped and out of fear are being abused. The reason that incident comes to light in many of the situations that we deal with the Border Patrol, is because they are abusing their power. We have situations where they've entered homes. We have situations where they stop people without any reason. We have situations where they literally harass people and threaten them, saying that they will detain the person's legal status or legal process because the person has not been cooperative or whatever. It's an abuse. When some one group or persons think they are above the law and begin to oppress or mistreat other people because of their fear, then there's definitely something wrong. To me the tragedy is that this happens, and people in the community, especially key people
that are in a position of voice and in a position of influence that they do not speak out. What it is, is that as long as the people that are helpless and voiceless that sometimes their rights are not as important as somebody else's rights. To me, that's the big tragedy of the whole deal.

JO: So the Border Patrol has physically harassed Hispanics?

AF: Yes.

JO: Have they wrongfully arrest somebody?

AF: Wrongfully, I guess when they can take the privilege of just stopping somebody and saying "Show me your I.D." without any probably cause, that's wrongfully. I just had a situation where somebody called me. They went to a house and asked for somebody who did not live there. The person who answered the door, they asked for his identification and the kid had just turned 18. The father was applying for his legal status, the kid's legal status. The kid did not have anything to prove at that point because his father was doing the paperwork. They, the Border Patrol forced their way into the home, took the kid, and made him sign deportation papers. Again, the tragedy is, is that nobody's speaking up, that we go before City Council, go before the Chief of Police, we go before even the Director of Immigration Naturalization Services and basically they're saying "Prove it to us." In other words, people are guilty before proven innocent. I have no problems with the Border Patrol doing their job. It is just when blatant discrimination, discriminating acts occur, the problem is that the rights of the helpless, especially those that are just as important as those in high positions. So that's, if you get me on the Border Patrol at this point it get's me a
little frustrated, I get a little excited because I get just as bothered by the actions of the Border Patrol but I get just as bothered by the silence of the community. To me it is a strong statement, people's silence is a strong statement as far as their position of whether they really believe in justice for all, whether they really believe they are equal and are allowed to be treated equally. By their silence people are saying, "No, it's not that important."

JO: It's the Ottawa County Border Patrol we're talking about, or is it just a Holland Border Patrol?

AF: No. The Border Patrol is a government agency. I mean, this is United States Government. [laughter] It's kind of silly when public citizens have to remind the United States Government about civil rights. It's just, it's a flaw in the system. Sometimes people think they're above the law.

JO: Does Border Patrol, what area is in charge of?

AF: Basically this Border Patrol covers all of west Michigan. While we are making noises here in Holland because there are people that are willing to speak up that we know it's happening all across this area.

JO: So other communities within western Michigan are also complaining about the Border Patrol as well or is it just here?

AF: I don't know, I don't know if they're doing that as forcefully and as publicly or even if they're doing it at all because half of the problem is not so much just that something is wrong, but that you have to have a process and you have to have a system or even have to have a group that is willing to take the action on, to articulate the problem. A
lot of times you get people that are staying out in the migrant camps and situations of
discrimination arise and they have no place to go. And out in the fields they don't say
anything. But there are some agencies that are taking on some cases against the
Border Patrol. I think it was a couple of years ago that I think it was the case of
Ramirez versus Webb when the Border Patrol stopped a car because it was driven by
Hispanics. A case was filed, a suit was filed against the Border Patrol and the Border
Patrol lost and had to pay damages. There is a precedence to this whole argument at
this point. This happened right here in Kalamazoo.

JO: Thank you very much Mr. Fierro.