1-1-1990

Gonzales, Alfredo M Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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Recommended Citation


Published in: 1990 - Members of the Hispanic Community (H88-0234) - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, January 1, 1990. Copyright © 1990 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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Interview with Alfredo Gonzales  
By Joseph O'Grady, 1990

JO: When did you first arrive in Holland?

AG: I arrived in Holland in October. I want to say October 18, 1971.

JO: Where did you first live?

AG: My reason for coming to Holland I should say, I was coming from Germany where I had lived for about two years. The reason I came to Holland was because my parents had moved from the South Haven area about 30 miles south of Holland where we had moved in the early 1960s when we first came as a migrant family to the state of Michigan.

JO: Where did you first come from? Where was your first residence?

AG: First residence in Michigan?

JO: No, before you came to Michigan.

AG: Before I came to Michigan our residence was in the state of Texas.

JO: Was that a rural area or an urban area?

AG: Well, we were outside of the city in a sort of farming community and we actually lived on a farm ourselves. So I guess it would be more of a rural area.

JO: What part of Holland did you originally settle in?

AG: We settled at 64 Medicine Place which is a street in the north part of Holland off River Avenue. There used to be a number of houses there and those houses, with the exception of one, are all practically gone now. The gas station that used to be there is gone. So that is where we first lived as a family.

JO: What was the condition in the neighborhood? Was it a nice area or sort of run down?
AG: I'm not sure there was even a neighborhood. There were four, five, six, about eight houses. Medicine Place is a sort of small street. It's a dead end. It ended on the marsh. And across the marsh is Brewer's Coal Dock. So there was not a whole lot of a character that one would describe to a neighborhood.

JO: How many people came with you?

AG: I originally came by myself, as I said, and my family was already here. But my father, and my mother, and brothers Tony and Reuben, and sisters Stella, Patty, and Mercedes all came with us. My older brother Lopi was not with us at the time.

JO: And where was he?

AG: Some place in California. I am not sure where.

JO: Why did you come to Holland? What were the conditions that brought you to Holland?

AG: We came to know Holland primarily through the missionary outreach of the Christian Reformed Church. When we were a migrant family in the South Haven area, there were some individuals from some of the local Christian Reformed Churches that would go out in the migrant camps and try to talk to people about the work of the church. Among those visitors were the late Alvin Koops who passed away this past year that is 1989, and another gentleman by the name of Peter VanderWaal who used to be a bus driver for the Christian high school. We became good friends with those two families and they invited us to come first to the Spanish Christian Reformed Church which we did visit for a couple of years and ultimately decided to sell the very small four acre farm that we had between the city of South Haven and Bangor. That
is how we happen to be here.

JO: Before you came to the Christian Reformed Church, did you have any religion whatsoever? You were Catholic by birth. Did you practice?

AG: We did. I was born to the Catholic church and continued in the Catholic church. For some of us, belonging to the church was very important. What I know now and what I knew then is much different then...well we were not a daily practicing, or even weekly practicing Catholic family. I would say that there was a strong Christian beliefs and certainly a great deal of reverence for the presence of a God in our lives.

JO: Where was your first job in the city?

AG: My very first job, as I said, I had just come out of the service, and I interviewed for two positions. One with the Ottawa County Sheriff's Department and another one with the Department of Social Services. And then the last one with the city of Holland. At that time the city was looking for some individuals to come work with them on essentially a government program specifically designed for betterance. So I applied and much to my surprise I was hired because I certainly didn't have any background in city government, and actually had very little knowledge about what I could contribute to the city. And in later years as I worked for the city of Holland for about eight in a half years, I was able to do two or three positions and the last position I occupied was that of an executive secretary for the Human Relations Commission for the City of Holland. I enjoyed my association with the city and doing some work for the city manager's office and doing some other special projects for them. In fact, I did come to know much about city government, so much that when I went to school I
majored in public administration thinking that I one day would like to continue a professional career in city government or serving government administration.

JO: With your job with the city, did you basically deal with Hispanics or did you deal with all facets of the community? Were you like a liaison between the city and the growing Hispanic community at the time?

AG: Well, some of it. I came to the city in 1971 or in 1972, at a time where a number of families were beginning to settle in the Holland area. My work with the Human Relations Commission involved the resolution of civil rights issues whether it was employment, or religious discrimination, or denial of housing opportunities. Some of that work was with Hispanic families, but I would only hasten to add that the work of the Human Relations Commission was work available and open to all citizens of the city of Holland. But it so happened that most of the citizens at that time come before the Human Relations Commission were of Hispanic, black, or women. White women who were coming forward with some sort of complaint. I would also add that part of my work when I was with the city was to work with what at that time used to be known as a youth commission. Something that the mayor had initiated, and I was working with some of the young people in the city. But I also did some other projects for the city manager's office. But I would say by and large my work was directed towards the work of the Human Relations Commission.

JO: Did you attend any schooling in the Holland Public Schools?

AG: I did not.

JO: Have your children or any other relatives?
AG: One of my sisters attended and graduated from Holland Christian. Some of my other brothers attended but did not graduate from Holland High School or Holland Junior High at that time. I have two daughters now Abby Marie and Sarah Isabelle. They are attending Maplewood Elementary School in the Holland Public School system.

JO: Could you give an accurate impression of what the school system is like for Hispanics during this time period? Say when you first came here when your brothers were in school and now that your daughters are in school? How has the school system changed, developed?

AG: It is hard to make that comparison and cycle make to 1972 and we are now in 1990. One can speak with I guess a much more advice and certainly a more informed opinion of what is taking place today. I am much more cognizant of the developments today. We are still concerned with the high drop-out rate of Hispanic students. We are concerned that the Holland Public Schools have specifically not done well in hiring Hispanic, multicultural faculty. I know that they made some good faith efforts at trying to secure some counselors. We are still going to have counselors. So in terms of what the schools have done say in the late 1980s and even today, well some of those efforts are recognized I would say that in no way did they meet the needs of the increasingly multicultural community in Holland. When I compare that to say the 1970s, some of those same issues were still going on. In fact, I can go back even before the 1970s. There were some documents available to me at that time in which the Hispanic community had made recommendations for the hiring of teachers and bilingual counselors and changes in the curriculum. And many of those changes were
made. Those suggestions have not in fact taken place yet. So while the population had changed dramatically from a small percentage in the 1970s to nearly 25% in the 1990s, some of the structural problems I believe remain with the schools. And while some changes have been made and one has to recognize that those changes have been made, there are still a number of issues that the school has not addressed.

Specifically, they have not addressed the high number of Hispanic students that leave the school without an education. They still have not done an effective job to attract and retain faculty from a Hispanic background. Telling from my conversation with some of the parents recently suggest that they are still concerned about the programs available to themselves as parents and to the students. So there were some issues that have not been resolved yet.

**JO:** How has the school system fared in the areas of bilingual education over the past years?

**AG:** Bilingual education as you know is a program that is available to students who are in the K-6 grades. I am not aware if there is a bilingual program for the high school students. I don't know if I can assess the effectiveness of the program. I can only see it from a distance. I know one of the purposes of that program is to take students who are monolingual in Spanish for example who may know math or who may know some other subject area, but whose main deficiency area is the English language. The purpose of the bilingual program would be to then take a student to provide him with the English language skills sufficiently so that student can be mainstreamed into the regular school system. To some extent that has been achieved and has been achieved
well. What has taken place beyond that I am not sure.

JO: Did you know much English when you arrived here in Holland?

AG: Well when I arrived in Holland I knew...

JO: You were quite fluent right?

AG: Yeah. I had a heavy accent which I still have in some respects. But I knew some English. I did not know any English when I first came to this country. Although I was born in Texas I was raised in Mexico by my grandparents, and I never attended school as a young child and came to know my first experience about education when I came back into the state of Texas and my father had to enroll me in the 8th grade at the age of about 15 and a half or so. And at that time I certainly did not know one word of English and could not read or write Spanish because although I could speak the language I did not know how to do that. So some of the language skills and language acquisition that I now have in both English and Spanish although deficient in some ways has taken place in my later years.

JO: What were your first impressions of Holland when you arrived?

AG: Well my first impression was probably the wrong one. I say that because I was living in Frankfurt, Germany, when I received a card from my sister Patty telling me that the family had moved to Holland. Having just spent about four days in Amsterdam, I had this picture of Holland, Michigan, being comparable to Amsterdam, the Netherlands. And quite to my surprise when I came and arrived on an early Sunday morning and find the entire city nearly closed I wondered if I had arrived at the wrong city. My initial impression was what happened? Is this the same city that I thought it
was? And later I came to understand at that time we had in fact what is called "blue laws" which restrict the opening of certain amusement parks and movies and other similar operations during Sunday. I came to know the community first very superficially, and later I came to admire the values and orientations of the people that settled this community. So my impression changed from a mutual one to one that I would say is an excellent community.

JO: What were the major problems you encountered in Holland? Do you have any form of discrimination against you? What forms?

AG: I can't personally say that I receive discrimination. There is a majority of images and definitions that Hispanics make about majority people in Holland and I would assume that by and large the majority of people make Hispanics in a similar way here in Holland. But, I personally never experienced any direct discrimination. I, for example, was never denied a job. I was never denied housing. I felt at times that my treatment was different. Whether that was my own perception, or my own feelings, or someone was just having a bad day then I am not sure. I interpreted some of those actions as being racist. The tone, the voice, the expression on people's faces certainly led me to a conclusion like that. But those are things that enter more into the realms of feelings and subjective interpretations of what one person conveys to another, rather than the directed racial slur or outright discrimination.

JO: Did any of your family members suffer any extreme forms of discrimination like racial slur, denied housing?

AG: Not to my knowledge no.
JO: Did you feel there were any racial tensions in Holland at any time? Was there a civil rights movement that sort of broke the city up at any point?

AG: I am not sure. I think Holland is atypical in many respects. The Hispanic community in some ways is atypical of Hispanic communities across the country. I remember in the late 1970s, perhaps 1975, when I walk with the members of the United Farm Workers Union, and picketed the Meijers on the north side and the kinds of comments people made to us as they were coming in. We were boycotting the selling of grapes and lettuce by the Meijers stores because of the situation migrants faced in the state of California. And so we were expressing ourselves through a peaceful demonstration in front of the store. And people would call you "communists," "go back from where you came from," or "get a job". Those kinds of comments people were making as they were passing by. But that was perhaps one of the most directed demonstrations. Later on, also in the 1970s, I remember very clearly that the Holland Chamber of Commerce had published a booklet that describes the city to perspective business people or perspective families who wish to make moving to the city. I remember reading, I still have a copy at home where it depicted Holland as this dodge, very white community. There was not a single mention of the Hispanic community. Both of us who were then involved in some civil rights issues saw the publication of this booklet and called attention to the members of the Chamber of Commerce and we said it is not possible to depict Holland if you do not include also members of the Hispanic community. Well they were very adamant. The publication had been done, they had been sent out, there was not a whole lot they could do. Well, members of the
Hispanic community at that time felt very strongly about an accurate representation of the city to include Hispanics and we began to negotiate with members of the Chamber of Commerce. We went as far as to suggest and in fact, we had resolved at that time that we were going to picket Tulip Time. So we had signs and flat cards that read something discrimination in Holland, Michigan. Tip toe through the tulips to discriminate. And some of those kinds of slogans I don’t remember them all well. But we negotiated fairly close until I think a couple of days before Tulip Time when the Chamber agreed to have an insert. First of all they stopped distribution of all the booklets. They agreed to have an insert if we were to write it, and then they agreed to attach that to the booklet. And I remember being one of the persons with Yolanda ________ who is now a reporter for the Lansing Journal. I took I would say 90% of the pictures that we put in the insert, and that was sent to the printers and that was sent back and we put it in the booklet and then the booklet was distributed. So there have been some moments of tension. But in no way do they compare for example to the racial tensions that other cities have experienced in the past. In that way I think Holland is atypical then other cities.

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

AG: Well one of the things that we need to remember is that members of the Hispanic community came for the same reasons then anybody else migrates to a new city. You come for job opportunities for security, economic security for the betterment of your family. I would suggest those sorts of reasons that most people migrate from across
the ocean to smaller cities like Holland. Those were the same aspirations that members of the Hispanic community had when they first thought about moving to Holland. The prospect of a job, the prospect of the fulfillment of what we know as the American dream. Those were all ideals I think that all of us had when we first heard of Holland and the opportunity for work. More precisely during the second war a number of the area businesses were in search of labor, and because people were moving to other labor markets there were some needs that were not being met by the existing population. Members of the Hispanic community I think were able to fill that gap. And therefore they found ready employment in the farming community first, second in the unskilled jobs, later in skilled positions, and later in some of the older mainstream jobs in the community. Those were the reasons that the Hispanic population came to Michigan. What have they contributed? Well, I think they have contributed to the stability of the community. The fact that you can have a segment of the population that is employed you provide for a tax base. They provide vitality to the extent that a community can thrive with cultural diversity to the extent that there is a recognition that others will contribute not only to the economic, but also to the social and to the spiritual welfare of the community. And then it seems to me that that community is going to be a viable community in the future. It seems to me that those are the kinds of contributions that the Hispanic community has made in the past. And it will certainly continue to make them in the future.

JO: What organizations do you belong to? In the city, within the Hispanic community?

AG: Well I am a member of the Latin Americans United for Progress which is sort of an
umbrella organization in Holland. I have been a member for years and have served as the president some years back. I am also a member of the Holland Community Hospital. I have served in that capacity now for seven years and currently I am the Chairman of the Board. I am also a Bank Director with the First of America Corporation. And very recently I finished my tenure as a member of the board for Young Life a local organization dedicated to ministry of young people. Those are some of my commitments presently. But I have been involved in a number of organizations. Both in Holland and in state.

JO: What would you like to see changed in the city?

AG: The change that I think about has to do more with definition. It seems to me that if this community is going to thrive in the future we need to have a clear vision as to what it is going to be say 50 years from now. What I mean by vision is that the people that settled Holland 100 years ago I think had a sense for the community that they wanted to have. A community that thrived in a work ethic, a community that thrived in a spiritual fellowship, a community that had a certain quality of life. Those are values I think that are still worth emulating. My hope would be that our city fathers and city mothers with the schools and a partnership with the business community they need to force an agenda that has a vision that incorporates those values. For if those values are incorporated then it seems to me that the racial strife that has plexed some of the communities, the lack of job opportunities and diminished quality of life and issues that we are not going to face because we have anticipated those issues and we are prepared and will work very hard then to make Holland the
community we want it to be. And it seems to me that that is not an issue that is dependent on race whether one is black or Hispanic or dark ______. But rather it is contingent of good citizenship. That is contingent from the desire that all of us want to establish and leave behind us a community that will be open, accessible, and caring for all members of that community at a particular time.

JO: Do most Hispanics share this view as you do?

AG: I am not so sure. I have discussed it with some individuals and there is a sense of this is our community too. But I would say that that is my own view and whether that in fact is shared by other people I am not sure because I am not a very public with some of those things and whether in fact they do that is yet to be decided.

JO: What do most Hispanics want changed in the city?

AG: I am not sure about what most of them think. Again I go back to what aspirations do we all have as individuals. I would imagine the aspirations that we have is a better future in some way for all of us. A better education for our children, stable community, peaceful neighborhoods, less taxes, [laughter] those kinds of things. Those are the same aspirations I would think that the Hispanic community would have. I also want to say that a strong spiritual direction is important consideration to the Hispanic community. That is a value that, although we don't discuss publicly, is certainly an important value for those of us who are here and certainly those of us who are going to come behind us.

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

AG: Well I see that we have no choice but to continue to find ways to develop tolerance
and respect. One way or the other we are going to be working together. The sooner that we learn to understand our strengths and our weaknesses the better off that we are going to be. It seems to me that the majority population needs to keep some things up, especially in positions of power. It seems also true and accurate to say that we in the Hispanic community need to make an assessment about what it is that we are going to contribute to the betterment of this community. And how are we going to do that. Do we do that through the achievement of higher education levels? Do we do that through political participation? Or do we do that through the contribution through the many volunteer and other organizations in our community? We have to make up our mind about some of those things. We also need to identify those issues in our community, that is the Hispanic community, that are negative. Lack of voter participation is not a good thing to have. So we need to find a way to achieve active political participation. That is our responsibility. Therefore, we need to identify those weaknesses that we have. When we are able to identify those things that take away from development then it seems to me that we are going to be transformed. And the beauty of this transformation is that it is not only specific to the Hispanic community, for when there is transformation all of us will benefit. It seems to me then that the Hispanic community and the majority community, all of us will be better off if we have gained first of all tolerance, that we gain understanding, and that we gain respect. There is room for more then one group in Holland. There is room for diversity and there is room for growth. And it can be achieved peacefully, and it can be achieved only if we dedicate ourselves to the collective good.
JO: Is Holland still divided then?

AG: Oh sure.

JO: Racially and how is it?

AG: There is division in the church. As you know most of the Hispanic community is Catholic although there are in recent years the development in the Assembly of Gods or the Angelical churches. There is development in a better area. There is also the separation in job. Well there has been some progress, the majority of the professional opportunities in Holland do not include Hispanics. I would say that Hispanics represent only about 2% of the professional, white-collar category in our community. So disproportionately they find themselves in skilled or semi-skilled positions. There is separation there. There is also social distance because you know you don't share in the same economic strata, you know people travel different economic circles. And, therefore, I think you will find very few Hispanics as members of the Country Club. You will find very few businesses in the downtown area. And by and large you will see an absence of participation by Hispanics in the general life of the community. So in some sense we share the same streets, and we share the same schools, yet there is cultural, there is at times linguistic, and there is social and political separation that divides the present Hispanic from the majority community in Holland today.

JO: You talked about white-collar jobs and I would just like to back track to your present position. Where are you employed now and what is your official position?

AG: I work at Hope College, the Assistant Dean for Multicultural Life, is a position that I have held for two years. Before that I was the director of the Upward Bound program
here at Hope College. And this is a job that I truly enjoy.

JO: Do you feel privileged to have such a position? As you put it, only 2% of most Hispanics hold white-collar jobs.

AG: I don't know if I would use the word privileged. But I certainly feel fortunate to be given the opportunity to work at a place like Hope. I am the only ranking Hispanic either on staff or faculty. So there is the sense of being fortunate. It also has its drawbacks, however, because there are expectations both by the college and by the Hispanic community and one has to at times to walk a very grey road that exacts a different type of pressure. But that not-with-standing, I certainly feel fortunate to be here.

JO: Thank you very much, Mr. Gonzales.

AG: Thank you, Joe.