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Rivera, Rebecca A Oral History Interview: Local Women

Carol Bechtel

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HOPE COLLEGE LIVING HERITAGE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
1980

Rebecca A. Rivera

INTERVIEW
The Hope College Oral History Project was designed to record and transcribe for permanent collection the "living heritage" of Holland, Michigan. Since the project's birth in 1977, Hope student researchers have interviewed people with various perspectives on Holland's history. Past projects have included:

- **Former Hope Faculty Members & Personnel** - 1977 - by Nancy Swinyard
- **Past Executives of the Reformed Church** - 1978 - by Conrad Strauch
- **Past Executives of the Reformed Church** - 1979 - by Derk M. Strauch
- **Important Women of Holland, Michigan** - 1980 - by Carol Bechtel

The persons interviewed represent a vital, yet non-renewable resource, whose reflections will provide primary material for future historical research.

Upon the completion of each interview session, the taped conversation was transcribed and edited by both the interviewer and the interviewee. Some alterations concerning accuracy of detail may have been suggested by the interviewer during the editing process, but at all times the viewpoint of the interviewee has been maintained. If the researcher should discover discrepancies between the interviews and published materials, it must be remembered that some divergence may be expected due to the highly personalized perspective of the interview. No claim is made that the information contained within these transcripts is absolutely accurate. No two people share identical viewpoints, and the interval of time between the interviewee's experiences and the events mentioned can sometimes intensify this divergence. Tapes of all the interviews are stored in the Hope College Archives in Van Zoeren Library.

Without the support of Dr. Jacob E. Nyenhuis, Dean of the Humanities and the Fine Arts, and Mr. William K. Anderson, Vice President of Business and Finance, this project would not have become a reality. Dr. Elton Bruins has given generously of his time and expertise as the advisor to the student interviewers. Finally, the success of this project must be attributed to the efforts of the interviewees - each gracious, receptive, and cooperative.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical Sketch and Summary of Contents</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview of July 31, 1980</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Original Copy Only - Hope College Archives)
Rebecca Arenas Rivera was born in Crystal City, Texas, in 1937. As one of seven children, she traveled with her parents in the yearly migrant cycle between Texas and Michigan. When she was 9 years old, her family settled permanently in Holland, Michigan, and Becky was enrolled at Beechwood Elementary School. She later attended St. Francis De Sales, Holland Jr. High, and Holland Sr. High Schools. Although language was initially a roadblock in Becky's education, it eventually became her strong point, as she was encouraged to continue and develop her knowledge of Spanish in High School.

The November following her graduation in 1954, she was married to Leo Rivera, from Reynosa, Mexico. In the next 25 years Becky was to face many changes, challenges, and triumphs. When the youngest of her seven children was just six months old, she and her husband separated. Becky moved back to Holland and began her work in the public schools as a teacher's aid. Later, she was employed in the public schools in another capacity - as a bi-lingual testing aid under Dr. Gene Scholten. Becky has also worked as a teacher's aid and a teacher at the Holland Day Care Center, which enabled her to work while her youngest three children were enrolled at the Center. At present Becky is the Director of the Holland Migrant Center, a job to which she devotes her characteristic energy and enthusiasm.

School has always been a love of Becky's, and since her graduation from Holland High, she has dauntlessly pursued her college degree whenever possible. She has taken courses at Hope, Grand Valley, Michigan State, and Pan American University in Edinburgh, Texas intermittently between 1970 and 1978. She is focusing on Sociology with a minor in Mexican American History.

Becky has been highly active in her church, school system and community. She has run for Holland School Board, Holland City Council, both for Councilman at Large in 1977, and as a candidate for the Second Ward in 1979. She attends St. Francis De Sales Church, where she has served as a member of the Church Council, the St. Vincent De Paul Society, and the Altar and Rosary Society. Becky
is also quick to voice her concern for parental involvement in the school's programs. She is particularly supportive of bi-lingual testing efforts, counselling, and parental support of student extra-curricular activities.

In a flier from her 1979 campaign for City Council, a caption announces that, "Becky exemplifies our traditional Holland and our growing Holland," I can think of no better summary of Becky Rivera's role as a woman of Holland, Michigan. She is a woman with personal courage and charisma; always willing to serve her family and community with devotion. She is concerned for her city's cultural heritage, as represented by all races living within the Holland city limits. Her dedication to her city is evident both in her concern for preserving the past as well as her progressive ideas for the future.
BECHTEL: Maybe we could begin by going through some of your personal background. Could you tell us where you were born and the facts surrounding your moving to Holland?

RIVERA: OK. I was born in Crystal City, Texas. And I lived in Crystal City, Texas for eight years. And in that time of eight years we used to come to Holland as migrant workers. I remember my parents working in the fields. And we lived out in a little farm area way out on the other side of Olive Township. We used to come there every year, and the farmers used to just welcome us deeply. My father and my mother worked, and I believe it was just my older brother – there wasn't very many of them, but every year we used to come back. And then when I was eight years old my father decided that maybe we should just stick to – more to the educational part, and he wanted us educated, so he said he was going to settle here. He didn't know any English – he knew very little English. And the places where they were hiring were the sugar beet factory, which is where Lithabar is now – on West 15th Street. And they were hiring Mexican workers, even though they did not know much English. They believed that they could still get along and do the work that they wanted them to do. And he liked it there and he stayed on, and he did learn English eventually. But seven of us were born to this family – there were four of us when we settled here, so three of my...two brothers and one sister were born here in Holland, Michigan. And I have...we're all scattered now.

BECHTEL: Before you were settled here permanently, did you make some kind of a circle to different farms between here and Texas yearly?

RIVERA: No, I think that my father – the time he was migrating was
just that he knew where he was going every year. And he would just
pick out some spots. It was more of a welcome party that we used to
have because he knew people. Now in Grand Ledge, Michigan - I know
we were there for pickles, I believe also, and sugar beets out that
wasy and things like that, so I know that there was different crops
at different times. But he more or less had it all set up before he
even started out. They caravanned, you know - four or five families
came all at once so if anything happened they were all together.

BECHTEL: How many stops were there during the year?

RIVERA: I don't know... I guess, you know, they waited till the
school year was out first - like, schools are out the same time as
here. And then they would come over here and they would have a place
to go. And all I remember is that they, you know...it would be at
least three or four stops before we hit Holland, Michigan, but Holland,
Michigan was always sort of like a last stop and then we'd go back to
Texas.

BECHTEL: So was Texas kind of a...your second home, or your first
home, or...

RIVERA: I don't know, I regard all my other homes as first homes be-
cause Texas was just for a little while, and then we would come back.
But then, when we settled in Holland, of course Holland was my first
home then.

BECHTEL: How old were you when you first started school, then?

RIVERA: Ah...I started when I was eight years old, and I remember going
to Beechwood School, so I was behind a little bit. My English...I didn't have any! (laughter) So, I remember being held back in kindergarten quite a bit, and it was because of the language. And there was really no one to help us bi-lingually at that time. We had to learn by getting dropped right into the middle of the stream, you might say, and pick it up from there.

BECHTEL: How would you characterize your life when you were eight years old - when you had first moved here permanently? What was your home life like, and the situation there?

RIVERA: I remember it being very...very united. You know, my brothers and sisters were always with us, and the towns we did go to...
Like, I remember Adrian, Michigan very well. We went there one year and we were in the "Fairgrounds" they called it, and they had the migrants there. And then we had a convent close by, and the nuns would come up and pick us up, and we went to a Catholic school - at St. Joseph's there... And I remember people being very, very nice and very gentle. You know - very kind. There was never any...I don't remember any of that real bad stuff that I guess does go on with migrant workers at points.

BECHTEL: Yes. It sounds like much more of a peaceful existence.

RIVERA: That's right. And, of course, my father was very peaceful. He just was a man who stayed at home most of the time - he didn't really have a lot of friends. Now, there are migrant families that, you know, they care more about being with their friends, and so on. They lose the family in that sense. But my father was very close to
us, and also my mother. They hardly ever went out - I don't understand how they could have seven children and not go out and have fun! They were always home with us, it seems like. It was a very close-knit family, I thought.

BECHTEL: Did you or your brothers and sisters have to work early on in the fields?

RIVERA: I remember my older brother being...you know, really showing off and saying he was working, but my mother and dad never really made us work. We were not the working kind! I think as we grew older and, you know, we still...in the summers when we'd been settled here we would strawberry pick, go blueberry picking, and everything else that everybody does around here in the summertime. Kids need jobs. But I don't remember like my father being after us to work the whole year in the fields or anything like that. We weren't really that old either.

BECHTEL: Are you the oldest in your family, or...?

RIVERA: No, my brother is two years older than I am. I was born in 1935. So...

BECHTEL: You were the second oldest then?

RIVERA: Second oldest of the girls, yes. He was a boy, and of course the girls always did most of the housework, so... I was part of the house! (laughter)

BECHTEL: Well, when your mother went to work was a large part of the family responsibility on your shoulders, then?
RIVERA: My mother didn't go to work once we settled here. She never worked after that. My father went into factory work, and she stayed home with the children. She never worked until my seventh brother was born...

BECHTEL: Oh, my goodness...

RIVERA: ...which was my youngest.

BECHTEL: It's amazing she felt like working! (laughter)

RIVERA: Well, I don't know. I guess my father was then kind of sick, and it was a thing where, you know, she had to support the family, more or less. And he died very young; he died at 52, when we were here in Holland, so...

BECHTEL: How old was the youngest child then?

RIVERA: Umm...Ron was - I think about three years old...very young, very young. Maybe migrant work did catch up with him, and, you know, he died quite young.

BECHTEL: Was it especially wearing on a person - that kind of way of life?

RIVERA: Yes, it was for my father because he worked very hard...he worked in the fields, and then, you know, he had the factory job. And then, I think about five years before he died, he was stricken with a stroke, and he was not a man to be held back for anything, and it slowed him down a bit.

BECHTEL: How many hours a day, generally, would that entail?
RIVERA: Well, when he worked I think for the sugar beet factory it was more than ten hours sometimes. And work in the fields is ten to twelve hours, depending on what jobs you have to do. And if you had to go out on a contract basis you had to have it done at a certain time. I remember him and my mother really hussling out in that field, you know. We used to play around a lot in the fields and that - we always used to wait for them, and it did take all day for them to work.

BECHTEL: Would the kids go along, then, and just...

RIVERA: We were right out in the fields with them. We didn't know what a babysitter was! (laughter) If we stayed with anybody it was always with aunts and uncles that were close by. But in Holland no one settled with us. We just stayed by ourselves here, and the rest of the families went up to - did cherry picking and all that. They'd been doing that for years; they still are doing it.

BECHTEL: So you weren't living in a migrant worker community, really?

RIVERA: No. Not like the farm areas that they have now, no. We were into like a farm house, and... They used to have a very small house for us that they fixed up for us - it was like a summer house in that sense. But it was because my father and mother were coming to work in the fields.

BECHTEL: How about your parents' educational opportunities? Where had they been raised, and what kind of...

RIVERA: Both of them were born in Mexico and they came very young to the Texas side. And they settled in Crystal City, and my father and
mother did marry there. But when they were younger it was up to third grade that both my parents had in Mexico. They did not go to school in Texas - there was no schooling for them. I think...I did a lot of background - inquiry or snooping - when I go back to Texas and... My cousin and I, who is a newspaper man in San Antonio, like to go back years and years back, and we have worked on a family tree. And we've come to discover that, you know, they were not educated because the fathers and mothers at that time wanted them to work with them - right along with them - whatever work they had because there was no factory that they could go into. It was just farm labor and picking whatever...
The spinach capital of the world is Crystal City, so... Where Popeye is, you know? Popeye's statue is right in the middle of the little small, tiny town. (laughter) Yes, we always go back and see that.
But I think it was normally because they just had to be home to - if there was work available they would go, even if they were that young. But there was no...

BECHTEL: What age would you imagine they actually started working?

RIVERA: I would say that they worked most of their lives, you know, by the time - they only went to third grade in Mexico, so then they settled in Texas they were probably none.

BECHTEL: What was the reasoning behind going to Texas, do you know?

RIVERA: I think Mexico was much more poor in the sections where they were than the Texas side. Texas did promise more, you know, more of the vegetable things. And, like, Crystal City, where they settled was spinach - there was spinach and cotton fields. They went out to
the cotton fields.

BECHTEL: The work was more assured, then...

RIVERA: Evidently, yes. And going back into Mexico - I've gone back there a couple of times - and I can see if you have no money you are very, very poor. You are not at all well off. Very hard to do.

BECHTEL: Nothing to get started with, perhaps.

RIVERA: And I suppose that my grandfather and great grandfathers thought of that too - that there was nothing to, you know, that they could raise their children on.

BECHTEL: What about your education, then, after you came to Holland? How did it progress?

RIVERA: Well, I finished high school, and everybody did in my family - my seven brothers and sisters. Of course, we all have those sort of things where, you know, brothers or sisters drop out or something. My sister, who has four children now, just graduated from high school - just four years ago. So, the ones who dropped out have gone back to school and gotten some schooling, and even college. I went right along and - I loved school. I just liked it; school was my big thing. I always loved it, ever since I was little.

BECHTEL: You went to Holland High?

RIVERA: I went right through the whole system. I went to Beechwood first, then we transferred to St. Francis. We went through the Catholic school for eight years, and then Jr. High and Holland High. And
And I come to Hope, too, whenever I can. So I'm a Hope College stu-
dent!

BECHTEL: For how many years, then?

RIVERA: At Hope? I have taken courses off and on since 1969.

BECHTEL: I see. When you were in high school, were there very many
other people from migrant backgrounds?

RIVERA: No. There was one or two Mexican families that I knew - the
Gonzales family were going to school with us. They had brothers and
sisters around the same ages as we, so they graduated the same years.
But they were more English speaking than Spanish speaking. They had
forgotten some of their cultural things, and both the mother and fa-
ther spoke a lot of English in the home, so they didn't know any
Spanish when... And I knew Spanish when I was...it was something that
I couldn't see at that time. But they were raised here - I guess
they came from Pontiac, Michigan - that area first, and they were about
the first Mexican family to settle here. And then we came after that,
but there had been two or three families here already. But when I
graduated in 1954 there was only the Gonzales boy Enis and myself,
who now we see at reunions, you know. But I'm very happy with the
thought that the last graduating class at Holland High had almost fif-
ty students.

BECHTEL: Really?

RIVERA: That's a lot of students, because usually ten or fifteen are
the ones that graduate other years.
BECHTEL: Is the Gonzales family you're referring to connected with Alfredo Gonzales?

RIVERA: No. No, they're another Gonzales. The Gonzales I'm talking about had been here for a long, long time. Their kids were born, I think, all in Holland - some in Pontiac. Tomasa, Enis' sister, was born in Pontiac, Michigan. But she works right now for the Bell Telephone Company. She's been with Bell Telephone for years - the girl that I went to school with. And of course we must have been the only Mexicans. I don't know how much roots they have actually of the Mexican heritage they did have.

BECHTEL: Was there a great stress in your family on keeping that Mexican heritage very close and alive?

RIVERA: Yes, very much so. In fact my father and mother would not hear of us speaking English in the home.

BECHTEL: Really?

RIVERA: That's how we maintained our Spanish. Otherwise we would have lost it also. But it was a deal where if we were in school we talked English, and as soon as we got home we had to talk in Spanish, and, you know, make sure that we answered in Spanish. My mother would always say, you know, she would never learn the English. It was very hard for her to learn it. She's 67 now - she's gone back to school twice, and she's gotten some of it. But she still cannot really sit down and write a story, right? But one of her main interests, you know, emphases was that we keep the Spanish language and keep it up.
And I guess in growing up, you know - my teenage years - we didn't have any close friends that would say, you know they're really Mexican, and they stick to their heritage and everything because we weren't that close to anyone.

BECHTEL: Did that make it harder for you to learn the English, then, because you didn't get to practice at home?

RIVERA: Yes, I thought it was. When I first began school it was very hard for me. And I guess, you know, my parents did not realize that. They thought that going back to Texas and settling there it would be... we had English speaking schools there - we would not speak the Spanish in the schools, but it still is hard to, you know, keep up the English once you have a whole town that's Spanish speaking.

BECHTEL: Did that kind of a dichotomy between home and school ever create any problems for you?

RIVERA: Yes, I would say so. I think that when I brought my friends home they would... it didn't feel right to be talking Spanish to my mother and have my English speaking friends waiting for me to explain to them what I was saying. And I think, you know, I think it's a good thing that both my parents kept that for as long as they did, because it really helped me out, as far as keeping my heritage and then keeping it alive in my family now with my own children.

BECHTEL: What about racial tensions, say when you were in high school? Was there...

RIVERA: Racial tensions? I didn't think so, because there wasn't
anybody to be racial with, you know. The Gonzales family were just the Gonzales family that spoke all English. They never referred to them as Mexican people, I guess. And I knew I was Mexican — we know it, and my family and all my friends knew it. But we never had this, you know, racial thing.

BECHTEL: What's the difference!

RIVERA: Yes, you know — what's the difference, actually? You know, I just had a better suntan than anybody else all during the school year. (laughter) And that's the way I thought of it — that there wasn't really any difference. And I guess, you know, we kept up our grades very well. I think that my whole family was, you know, into the school system thing. And although my mother and father were not involved in like the PTA's and all that stuff, we still would have friends that would help us out when we needed it. And we had very good teachers at the time, so... I guess I'm saying that there weren't many problems with it. The only thing I remember is being encouraged in continuing my Spanish and really being good in it. All my teachers did that because they knew I was Mexican. I guess there was... and I guess being good students helped a lot. If we would have been... needed extra, extra help I think we could have been very distinguished into that... into not knowing that we were really into the school thing.

BECHTEL: Did you ever feel any kind of... Well, some students nowadays I've heard, that come into a school district with a language barrier are sometimes put into Special Ed. classes. Did you ever feel any of that kind of treatment, or were you recognized as a bright
RIVERA: I think the majority of our family was on the "bright student" side, you might say...at least the older children of my mother and dad's family. But as I grew older and after I graduated I heard that and I knew it and I saw it - that it was getting to be that way. Of course, there was no bi-lingual program, and that didn't help any when a child who speaks only Spanish comes into the classroom because he's lost - he's completely out in left field. And so that it helps to have someone that will know the language and will help him. And at one period in our time it was the thing where children were being put into Special Ed. They were slow learners - they would not learn at that pace. And they couldn't hardly keep up. Let's face it, they would have to be put somewhere where it wasn't the regular school stream.

BECHTEL: A slower pace...

RIVERA: Yes, a slower pace.

BECHTEL: When did you graduate from high school?

RIVERA: I graduated in 1954.

BECHTEL: And what did you do immediately after that?

RIVERA: Well, I was already engaged to a Mexican friend of mine from Mexico - from Reynosa, Mexico. And of course he had wanted to get married right away, and I had wanted to pursue some college, and it was impossible because he was very - ah - enthusiastic about being
married. He came from a family that was not as close-knit as mine—he didn't have much of a family. And he just wanted to make a family for himself.

BECHTEL: He was ready for that security...

RIVERA: That's right. And I married in November of that same year—1954.

BECHTEL: How did you meet him?

RIVERA: He was—what do you say—the nephew of one of our friends that we knew on the east side of town. And they're still around here too, but he didn't know any English at all when he came. He was completely Spanish speaking. I think he had gone for the first and second grade on this side—in Texas, but he had been raised in Mexico, so it was very, very hard for him to really get into it. And I think he depended on my English to get by on a lot of it. And he probably thought that that would help him out a lot. He went into the service right after we got married. He was in for two years—Army at Fort Knox, Kentucky. And...a very bright man. He learned English very well while he was there, and he got to be a translator.

BECHTEL: Oh, my goodness.

RIVERA: You know, it was something that he did on his own, you might say. But, ah, he learned English very fast.

BECHTEL: So, did you go with him then?

RIVERA: To Fort Knox, Kentucky? I was working at the time at the
Holland Furnace Company, which was a big company here that employed so many office employees. And I took a course in business, as far as office practice, and payroll, and things like that, so I was very comfortable in that job. And when he left for the service there was no assurance of us getting an apartment and things like that. So, most of my time I stayed here, and then when I could I did go with him. Our first son was born at the time that - in the two year period that he had in the service.

BECHTEL: Well, how did your other jobs progress? What other jobs have you had since that time?

RIVERA: Uhm... for the time that I had my own seven children - I had seven children - I did not work at all - until my youngest child was six months old, in fact. But that was because of the separation in my family. My husband decided he would do other things, and I decided to move back to Holland - we were in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan then - and I moved back with my seven children. My oldest son Marco was nine years old. Then is where I continued to work. I worked in a hospital up in Mt. Pleasant for a while - for about six months...in a...oh, I guess a state home. And then from then on I came back to Holland. I worked in public schools, and...

BECHTEL: In what capacity?

RIVERA: In the public schools I was a teacher aid, and then I went to work with Dr. Gene Scholten as a bi-lingual testing aid - testing children who were placed into Special Ed. classes.
BECHTEL: I see.

RIVERA: And that would...one of the things that - at that time they decided to open up that job, because there was a need to be testing children at different levels in Spanish. And I was available to do that and I could do it, so... I worked with him for a year and a half, and in that time I decided that I wanted to go back to college. So I decided to go back to college for a year and a half and get some more credits. And when I came back - I had taken courses here at Hope, but I went back specifically to Texas to go to college - at Pan American University, because my ex-husband was there and he helped me out with my children while I went back to school.

BECHTEL: I see. I was going to say - how on earth did you manage seven children when you went back to school?

RIVERA: Yes. Well, I would not have done that without him. But at the time he was not married, and he wanted to see the children again - he had not seen them for years and years. We had gotten lost somewhere in the stream. I was near the college...or near Edinburgh, Texas, and he lived in McAllen, Texas with the children and I was living in Edinburgh where the college was. So I did go for a whole year and a half and that was a big help to me. It was a boost to me to do that. And I came back to the Holland Day Care Center as program director then. I had been a teacher there for about five years - PRWR teacher aid first and then a teacher. And I like working with children. Of course, I have seven of my own - so I do love them. (laughter)
BECHTEL: Your experience would recommend you!

RIVERA: And now I'm at the Holland Migrant Center as director, and I really love that job. That is a beautiful job.

BECHTEL: Going back to the day care thing for a second - what were the objectives in that program?

RIVERA: Ah, in that program I started out as a separated woman with all these children, and it was an opportunity for me to get into the Holland Day Care as a teacher aid - as a parent first and a teacher aid. And also put my children in there while I was working - which is a great opportunity for anyone who is left alone and does not really have all the schooling she needs to be doing other jobs. And I got quite a few credits for going back to Holland Day Care Center doing the training and the teaching also at the same time - and my children being right in the Center. I had three children in all in Day Care Center. The last three were part of that Day Care Center... that was 1967.

BECHTEL: How would you describe the service that center performed? Where is it really geared...

RIVERA: Well, it's geared for working parents or parents in training. And it is for single parents. They do take ten percent of over income families, but the rest of the families are under low income guidelines that Day Care mandates - which means that the parents have to be either in training or in school or working - employed. Which keeps them off the ADC roles as you could imagine. Thats...it's a way of doing that. And I would prefer much better to do that on my own than
to actually be on any kind of welfare system.

BECHTEL: How did you get involved with the Migrant Program then? How did you hear of that position?

RIVERA: That position was not open when I first applied back here at the Holland Day Care Center - 1978. They did have a director who was running it. And I had said to someone that I would like to someday run the Migrant Center as director. And then the opportunity came because the director that was there last year quit in August. And that was left open at that time. And at that time - they did close earlier. From March to October we're open to help our the migrants. And then one of the teachers took over as director then and they closed up the Center in September. But this year was an opportunity for me to sort of get my foot in the door and say that I was interested in the job. And they did offer me the job with a little bit more money than here at the Holland Day Care Center. So I took it with that in mind - that I really wanted to be out there. And there was a little bit more opportunity to move upward, because I was program director here and Day Care and now director of the Migrant Center. A top... a gateway to the top of the ladder!

BECHTEL: What does your job entail?

RIVERA: Oh, it's a busy, busy, busy day. I heard that the Migrant Center was very busy last year in 1979 - that they were licensed for 59 children - infants through six years of age. This year we're licensed for 85 plus an overenrollment of maybe two or three. And it's a lot bigger than before. But it's a full day because we open up at
6:00 A.M. We already have people there at 5:30 in the morning. We have our first bus that leaves us children at 6:15 - and these include children that are two weeks to one month old babies that are brought in on the bus.

BECHTEL: Two weeks?

RIVERA: Yes. We have had two week old children already. Last year I believe they had quite a few and this year we had two month old babies and one that's about four weeks old right now, but that had been there for about two weeks - right after they got out of the hospital. But the day opens up very, very early. And we have two shifts of people. They start from six to two and then the other shift comes in at 10:30 and we sort of double up during the day and we're open until six in the afternoon. And that is with the - very much in agreement with the growers because they need their workers out that long - out in the fields. Last year I believe they worked up to 68 hours a week. And this year they don't have as much work as before, but they're working up to 45 hours a week. So that's quite long.

BECHTEL: The Center must take quite and extensive staff.

RIVERA: It does. We have quite a large staff. And the CETA program - Comprehensive Employment Training Program - that is a big help to us. And that always has been a big help. I think they...last year they employed fifteen high school students from 14 to 21 years of age. And they did very well with them. They were very good workers. They were really great out there. This year we're doing the same thing. That's what keeps our staff going. And of course, we cannot replace our own
staff just to put a CETA person in. We can't do that. We have to keep our own staff and then put those people on as extra people. And that's a big help to us because we have a lot of children this year.

BECHTEL: Certainly there must be more children out there. What do they do if both their parents are working? Where does that leave the children for the day?

RIVERA: Well, if their not in the Day Care Center they're in the field. If we find children in the field and they do not want placement in the Day Care Center... Now, we're filled up most of the time, but we let go of a lot of children because the families move. They're here one day and then sometimes they want to go up to Hart, Michigan and pick cherries - they move automatically. They just let somebody know at the camp and they take off another day. We lose those children. But in the summertime, like now, we replace them very, very fast because there's blueberry pickers and anything else that's out right now - the berry season. But the parents who don't know about Day Care Center - are unfortunate enough not to know - they take the children out in the fields. And there have been some very, very bad things happening with children in the fields. And I think that up to this year it...Social Service will pay us to have the children in the Center - it's funded by Social Service Department. And then they have said that Social Service would be upon them in the fields if this is what they find. But if they don't have Center care - we don't have the room for them - they are likely to do that. But Social Service also has put in day care homes where a mother...a migrant mother could be licensed to take care of up to six children including her own. In
the home... And they get paid less than what we would get paid at Center, but it's a smaller group. But the staff...our staff is very, very full. We have five teachers that have...that out of those five, three have worked in centers before and have four years of college and have gone into some kind of a teaching thing. And we have had our teachers there that have taught there for seven years that have a lot of experience, but really don't have the credit hours, you might say, but they're very, very good teachers. And it's completely Spanish-speaking. We have this year two Anglo teachers that are working for us that have four years of college, and one black girl that we had at the Center for years - she went back to school at Grand Valley and got her degree and she's working in the infant department. So we do have a big, big staff. I would say our staff runs consistently about 26 that we hire on our own including part time help, because we have such a long day, and about 26 have come in through the programs. And CETA's not the only program that helps us out. It's a WIN program which helps ADC parents get back into the work field. And the other one is MEHD, which is Michigan Economics for Human Development, which helps specifically with migrant families - settled out migrant families. So we employ them and they pay them. So we are just very fortunate to have programs that can help us out that way.

BECHETEL: What's the curriculum like? What can you do with a two week old baby?

RIVERA: Yes. The curriculum is - like with the older children we have just like the Holland Day Care Center. They do have a cognitive orientation of child development in the room. And with babies - we work with them in stimulation, actually. Talking to them...just having the infant in your arms. If you're "baby-prone" (laughter) you are right there speaking to them. And they're answering back. We have...this year the infant room is very decorated. They have a lot of mobiles and...the teachers and the staff - all the whole staff has been very cooperative
in really making the place look like a real nursery. And it's really neat because the children are all...have a lot of colors in the rooms. And they have good, good mothers that work with us. We hire about six migrant mothers that come right along with their children - their own children. Most of them have three or four children in our center in the different age groups. So we do have migrant mothers that come in. It makes for better communications with the migrant farms, also.

BECHTEL: Yes, I can imagine.

RIVERA: But we do hire them.

BECHTEL: What kind of accidents are you referring to in the fields with the children? Machinery accidents or just neglect...?

RIVERA: I think last year and the year before they had some...at least I've read of some and I heard is that - it's on children that were left in the cars with the windows closed and it was 98 or 75 or whatever degrees it was, and that they found them suffocating. And some parents do take them right out in the fields, and of course, they get bit. Mosquitos are just terrible; they carry a lot of infections. And you cannot get rid of that stuff once, you know, the child gets bit. There has been quite a lot of it...I think machinery is another accident thing where older children who are, you know, more mischievous - like the five year olds who cannot sit down and behave (laughter) you might say under a tree or something - is that they would get near machinery. And of course, farmers are now more aware of all that. I don't think that they hire families that really have smaller children...And then they report them to the centers also. We have some really good growers that have been very helpful to us - Zalenka's farm is one of them, and Van's Pines, Brady's - whatever farm the children come from where they're settled because they
have migrant housing for them, they report them to us and they're very, very happy to know that the children will be taken care of, at least eleven hours out of the whole day. Whereas both the father and mother can work, which helps them out a lost because they have these people out all these hours. So, there have been accidents, and I'm sure Protective Services has some files on it. And we hope that nothing ever happens with it that way, but we...we are only a center with 87 children and that's all we can keep there. And I think that they were thinking of starting some up by Grand Haven which would be very, very neat, because they need them. Now, we have kids coming in all the way from Allendale right now - close to Allendale, Michigan.

BECHTEL: They're bussed in?

RIVERA: They're bussed in, yes. Our buses run very early.

BECHTEL: Would you say that there is really a need for expanding that service?

RIVERA: Oh, definitely. Oh, in the past they're very happy that we do have centers because I think our center draws in a lot more farm workers out here. And it's one of the drawing cards that they more of less present to the family where both can work. Where the older kids who are out of school can work with the family and make more money. And the children are well taken care of, because it's a big long program for them.

BECHTEL: How is this program funded?

RIVERA: It's funded right now through the Department of Social Service. And that funding has been drastically cut this year. As of right now we're in the midst of fighting a lot of things, and one of the things is that Dr. Jack Dempsey, who is a social service director in Lansing, has had to cut 12 million dollars out
of its budget. And unfortunately we have no lobbyists up in legislative to be fighting for our cause. And child care seems to be the one that has started in the last ten to twelve years, so that's the one that gets picked on. And unfortunately it has a lot to do with...all our children that we have in the Center...that cut means that if we are receiving fifteen dollars and some cents for one small child which is an infant - which is from zero to thirty months - they call that infant to toddlers - that has been cut down to five fifty per child. The older children that we are getting $10.50...or $11.50, I'm sorry, over two and a half to six - that has been cut almost the same way: $5.50. And there are no centers in this whole state of Michigan that can make it on $5.50 a day for infants where we have to comply with state laws. If we're running a center - we get license for it - we are to do what they say is all right for children - so many feet of space for each child. And we have to have the right equipment - we have to have bottles - you know, formula bottles. We cannot do our own formula. So that's all mandated. But then we have to - that's all money. It takes a lot of money to run a thing like this. And unfortunately, there is that cut coming - on August 24th is when it's supposed to start. But the providers from all over Michigan...There's about 229 centers in Michigan right now that do provide services for migrants, and the Holland Day Care Center - just like the center here that's open all year round - they are funded also...they have other sources of funding. They have the Head Start Program. They have over income families. And of course Social Service families is the biggest - they have the biggest in Social Service because of ADC mothers, mothers in training and so on. And fathers also who are back into the work force. That it's...it cuts back on every program in Michigan. And the providers are really, really fighting. We have the parents involved up to the point that we have had - we have our own policy council right now, formed by the parents. We have three parents that are in the farm areas, and we have an executive
board, and we have community people on our policy council. We have met several times since we heard about this mandate that came last Friday - through registered mail...but we have to answer it, right? And they have got together and formed a petition. And we have to find families on petition. Our policy council has written to Governor Milliken and Dr. Dempsey and Keres, who is also in Social Service - he's chairperson of some subcommittees out there - that they cannot cut out that funding because it's going to be drastically cut. Our centers will lose out and we'll eventually fold up completely.

BECHTEL: Yes, they'd have to.

RIVERA: I think that is their main aim - is to say families should be united families where the father and the mother...the father goes out to work and the mother stays home and takes care of the children - which is unrealistic because a lot of our families are divorced families, separated, or...one family by either death or whatever... These families cannot possibly make it if they don't go out and work and be trained for some specific job.

BECHTEL: Is the divorce rate higher in this community - in the migrant community?

RIVERA: No. In the migrant community we do not have...I'm sorry, we do not have divorced parents. It is not...the centers that are around Michigan...the majority of them are, or they do go for the one parent family - either through divorce or losing one of the parents somehow. But our migrant center is only for migrant children - we're only open for migrant children - and out of those families there's very few that are actually divorced women, or women with children that have never gotten married, or something like that. But you do come across in centers...like in town and so on... But no, those families stay very close together. They do not find divorce as one of their alternatives, I guess. And the families are together.
I mean, they may have problems just like everybody else, but they seem to run generation through generation. I think I disappointed my family by getting a divorce at the time I got mine - which in Mexican families it's...you marry for life...Catholic Church theology, and then the religious, also, where you marry for once and that's it. But I found that because I was raised in Holland, Michigan, more or less, and there are opportunities for women to go out and be career-minded even though they are raising a family, that my husband did not think that way. It was that the husband should provide and the woman should stay home, bear children, and have 25 children or whatever...

BECHTEL: Seven seems like quite a few!

RIVERA: Seven is a lot of children. Yes, you're not kidding, it is. (laughter) But I'm very happy I had them - I can tell you that. But it was a thing where I did object to some of the things that he was raised with. And being both Mexican families from both grandparents being born in Mexico on both sides, it was hard to deal with because my raising up here was a lot different than it would have been if I had been raised in Mexico. And I think that my...then my background would have been just to stay by my husband and do exactly what is supposed to be done in families. And a lot of families do stick together with that in mind. They're united for life - it's just beautiful...if you can take it! (laughter) But at the time I thought it was just a lot of pressure on my children, and it wasn't very good for them to be growing up... Better to be single and try to raise them up myself - doing a better job than if we were always arguing about everything.

BECHTEL: With the tension...

RIVERA: Tension...very much tension.

BECHTEL: What kind of things do you do during the day?
RIVERA: All day at the Migrant Center?

BECHTEL: Yes. Your job.

RIVERA: Yes. My main job is to see that we have full staff according to guidelines from the state. And it is to see that the children are well taken care of. And there is some learning with the children — especially like in the infant room where we do stimulation — we talk to them all the time. We learn how to feed them well and things like that. And then in the older groups to know that there is some learning. We have lesson plans just like the regular school system. We do them every Friday and then we, you know, put it up on the bulletin board. And the head teacher makes sure that the teacher aids and the people who are helping around are all doing something with the children. ...a lot of musicians in little Mexican children and they love to sing. And we had our first open house on May 29th and we had a program set up for the parents that was really neat. I think...they usually did that every year anyway, but it was nice. I think that my main job is to see that the Center is run well, and if there are problems that we know how to cope with them. But the big problem right now is this cutback we're going to have. Which would mean that maybe after August 24th the director or the board of directors might decide that instead of working with a deficit all our lives while we're open that it's better to close. But if they do not change the rates...if we do find some method that we can work on and an injunction to stop it, we will continue to be operation till October. I have great faith that that's going to happen. Because I'm sure there are children who need our services — that we need to be out there. But my day's very full. We serve three meals: breakfast early at seven, lunch at 11:30 or 12:30, and then some snack in between, and then some kind of a meal before they go home on the bus — because if our buses don't start out until 5:30 PM that means those children are very tired and they want to go home and
probably go to sleep. So, we do provide those. And, of course, we get provisions from the food programs (USDA) in the state of Michigan also. So we are provided with supplements from there. But, our program runs very, very, very full. In our office, besides myself I have a secretary and then I have a practitioner nurse— that's the first time this year that we have had a person working in this field where it's really needed with a lot of the health needs of children and physicals and shots...

BECHTEL: I would think there'd be a real need for that.

RIVERA: There is, definitely, yes. We were fortunate enough to have Sally with us this year. She graduated from the University at Ann Arbor, I believer, and she is a nurse practitioner, which really helps us out because, you know, we don't have any doctors that are close to us. Except that we do have Clinic Night, and the Clinic is very helpful in being open for parents and for children at night when the parents can take them also.

BECHTEL: How about dental care? Does any attention get paid to that?

RIVERA: Oh, yes. Bangor, Michigan has a dental flourine treatment. Saginaw, Michigan is helping migrants all around the state. In fact we have them there for two days starting today. We have a whole clinic set up there for dental, and they are just checking teeth this time. Every child gets their teeth checked free there. And if there's work to be done we have had some children who have gone up to Bangor, Michigan, which is part of the dental thing, and they have had teeth extracted and good dental help for children. And dental and medical are our main source of help... services for that.

BECHTEL: I heard that you were involved in kind of a crusade for hot lunches.
RIVERA: A long, long time ago, yes.

BECHTEL: Tell me about that.

RIVERA: Oh, I remember that so well. At the time we did not have hot lunches in the schools. And a committee got together here, and there were some really good people on our committee. And they decided that we would go to Washington, D.C. And two of us got picked to go and we presented our thing up in Washington, D.C. And it was a lot of information and we brought back information...to open up the hot lunch program in the schools.

BECHTEL: Why was there so much resistance against that? Were there traditions that people just didn't want to let go, or...

RIVERA: I guess I would say that it was simply a lot of work to coordinate, for one thing. And that's like a busy restaurant, right? You've got to feed so many children. And I guess knowing...I guess we could have had that service a long, long time ago, but it was just that it was never really pushed by parents. And people knew they were... When we went to Washington D.C. they (all the other states) were fighting for a hot breakfast program. And we were just into the hot lunch at the time because other cities have hot breakfasts and hot lunch now provided through the schools. And of course with the cutbacks I think that that's one of the first things they're going to drop...in the future, too. Which I'm sorry about, although I think that the hot lunch program has worked well here. We had a lot of problems with it in the beginning.

BECHTEL: You ran for City Council a couple of times, didn't you?

RIVERA: Yes.

BECHTEL: When was that?
RIVERA: I ran for Councilman at Large a while back...I would say about...I haven't got the dates in my head, but I would say about five years ago. And then last year I ran for Councilman for my ward - Ward 2...I live on the West side. I lost very badly in the beginning - for Councilman at Large. Of course, that's the biggest job of them all. I don't think I would attempt that again, but it was a good learning experience for me. And I got to know a lot of the ways to go if you want to run again, right? And this past year I ran for Councilman in Ward 2 and I did well. I...my committee was proud and I was too. And I had a gung-ho committee that worked with me. I think that without them I wouldn't have done as well as we did. We did well. But it was the thing where the incumbent always seems to get first shot. And she's the only Councilwoman on Council. They have never had a woman on before Bea Westrate. And we're very proud of the fact that she's a woman and she's on there, right? But I think that more women should be encouraged to run for those posts. I really do. I know another friend of mine that ran and she lost at the same time - well, I think a year or two after I ran for Councilman at Large. Women have run for this post, but it's very difficult to get into any Council post. It's something that is not seen around Holland, Michigan! And then a Latino running for something like that, it's... I think it's quite hard to take for some people. And Bea Westrate...I had talked to her before I ran for Council. When I talked to her she was not going to run at all. She was going to give it up. She was not healthy. She had other reasons for not really being on Council. And all of the sudden it just turned around and she filed her petitions after I filed mine and she said she was running. Her constituents had gotten worried. So, you know, that answered it all.

BECHTEL: Yes.

RIVERA: And actually, the woman never...I don't think that she ever met with the
committee...did her only advertising the Saturday before the election - didn't really work to get elected. And she won. She got a lot of votes I would say. About 5000.

BECHTEL: I'll bet that was frustrating.

RIVERA: It was frustrating to know that she didn't want to run and she only ran because there were some reasons to run at the time...

BECHTEL: Pressure?

RIVERA: Pressure...from her own ward probably at that time, or from other people in the community. And I'm afraid that one of them is that...because I was Latino, really. And that hit me as a prejudice thing at the time. It was unfortunate.

BECHTEL: Is there any Latino representation on the Council now?

RIVERA: None whatsoever. We have some committees that do have Latino representation on them - the committees from the city itself. In the schools - we don't have any. I ran for school board also one year. I did not get elected either. All the hard work! And that's all volunteer work you do for months. And it's very discouraging when you find out that you didn't get it.

BECHTEL: What is the percentage - do you happen to know - of Latino population?

RIVERA: Yes. I think around 20%. I think Human Relations has that count around 20%. It could be more with, you know, the census they took this year, because there are a lot more Latinos now. But out of those 20% - they're not registered to vote. Which has been our thing - to get people to register to vote. And we had a couple of organizations - one organization was really going to do their best to get a registration drive going. And it was never done because the people were
not interested...they were not interested in the voting part of... They're very happy the way they are at that point. And, you know, I think that they might say, like maybe some people that have been in the community for a long time that you're just ruffling some feathers if you're up there doing something. And it could be that - I don't know. I sincerely hope that other women run because I think women are a minority, period - in anything that has to do with Council, or Commissioners, or whatever.

BECHTEL: What were some of the issues in your campaigns, specifically.

RIVERA: A lot of it was just better communications with our Latino population because it was growing and it still is growing. And, of course, being part of the ward where - if there were any problems, it would be open to them to come and talk about it. Someone that would listen. And I think one of my platforms was also senior citizens. That I think that, you know, a lot of things could be done for senior citizens in the community that just aren't. And I had others. I work with children closely, and that's, you know, my highest priority. And anything to do with them as far as centers or anything like that...and I think that that might hit a raw spot, too, for people that go out and vote. Because they're saying - we're running the centers for women who are on ADC - like the Holland Day Care Center, the Home Start Program here on 13th Street. They're run with the specific thought that they are working with mothers who are on ADC, mothers who have never worked before, and mothers who have never had to do anything - any sort of thing... or even know how to raise children. That they're teaching those mothers - training. It's a training for them to learn. And, of course, tax dollars are used for those...through Social Services...through the tax dollar that everybody pays. So, I think that that's really hurting people - saying, you know, "They're taking my tax dollars so an ADC mother can have another child next year," or something like
that. It's really ironic - where the child is the most hurt in that instance.

BECHTEL: How would you say the relationship between the Hispanic community and, say, the majority community in Holland has progressed or regressed throughout the years that you've been in Holland.

RIVERA: It's progressed up to a point where I think the Latino community is happy at the point where they're at. They are not, you know, mortified by anything that happens. Maybe it has something to do with migrants. Maybe it has something to do with people that are unjustly treated in the courts, or whatever. But they really don't want to get involved. There are few people that do. And the ones who are uncomfortable are the ones who want to get involved and want to change something. And in "changing" I don't mean you just take the whole world and change it - especially the community of Holland - which would be very hard to do. (laughter)

It's, you know, just getting people aware of that's really going to happen or what is happening out there. And it's just like every family on the block. If they're happy with their situation they're not going to bother the neighbors. They're not going to look in on that senior citizen that's probably very sick or something because they don't want to get involved in anything. And I think that involvement is one of the things that is very big in Holland. People don't want to get involved. They don't really want to work towards other...some things could be changed that would be for the benefit of their own children and for the benefit of their grandchildren or whatever. But I see them as...the Latinos, who have been here for years - I've been here 38 years. I've seen families come and go. I've seen families that have been very...treated very unjustly. Latinos, Cubans, Puerto Ricans - whatever comes. And if there would have been people to help them they could have made it. But they go away with the thought that it is rough in Holland, Michigan. I think that...I remember the first black people that came into Holland, Michigan.
It was very rough for them to get a house on Washington Avenue. A couple of people fought and fought and fought - and they're here. And nothing ever happened, let's put it that way - but it's just that people just don't want to be looking at that - that there are other kinds of people living right next door to them, or whatever it is. It's a close-knit town. And it's still with the Van Raalte idea that... the big fence. I don't know what it was - a big wall. I guess there was a big wall at one time, where it could have been just Dutch people living here. And a very happy Dutch community. But people coming in - like the American Indians - they were here and things like that. I don't know - I've read some of those articles and I'm really...I get kind of angry at some of those articles I read that have been written about, like, the American Indians that were here first. And the town that's Holland...Allegan and all those were all Indian names. Where they were put aside and they had to go elsewhere, because there was a lot of pressure put on them at that time. And I think that this town is...I don't know...I guess some of the community people think that because other people are coming into the community to live and - in harmony at that point - that they think they're bringing in some bad things into the city.

BECHTEL: Like a disease, or something.

RIVERA: Some disease, yes...

BECHTEL: How about...have you heard of any specific instances of coolness...shall we say coldness even in regards to the churches, Hope College, or the public schools?

RIVERA: Yes, I have heard it. And I've been involved in a few of them myself as far...why are they mistreating some parents or some children in our school systems? And I think things have been solved. And I think human relations has been very good at handling some of those situation.
BECHTEL: Probably improved just because of the contact.

RIVERA: Oh, yes, I really do. And there's always somebody to fight, like for the underdog, you might say. Of course, they have to be more in the middle than to choose sides. But I think they make other people see sides that they have never seen before. And, I guess the only thing I'm frustrated by is that if there are some things going on like - there's a rape or a robbery or whatever - I guess the Latinos are the first ones to get it even though they might not have been involved. And I think it's looked on as that. I guess I open up the paper and I read the police reports and I always think...and every night if the Latino names that are on there...I say, "Oh, my...there isn't that many today." It's not that it's just because there's more of them here that it happens more. It's just that it happens every once in a while. And we're sorry to hear that our Latino friends have been involved in things like that. But, I think the HOY Program, which is Helping Our Youth program, which was started quite a long time ago, helps a lot of the families in alcohol and drug abuse right now. They have a Fennville area, and their office on College Avenue or on...yes, College Avenue I believe - way out by 25th Street. And that's helping a lot of Hispanic parents find out if they do have problems with alcohol and trying to help them - like A.A. and things like that. Well, before, they weren't helped at all. It was just...finally they got lost in the shuffle, you might say, and possibly no help at all from anywhere. But I think those are just going to - say, specifically, some to be that they are there to help some of the families get started, especially if they do have some problems.

BECHTEL: Do the Spanish speaking high school students have more of a problem now than they did, say, when you were in high school?

RIVERA: Yes. I really do, because now they have a high percentage of Hispanic in the schools. And it's very hard for children to grow up in the system and then be
expected to be like "A" students and take part in like...be in cheerleading and be in football, be in baseball when the parents don't help out that much. And I guess I come from a background where I've been on a Y.M.C.A. board, I've been on board for helping out youth and everything, and I know that it's parent input you've got to have if those kids want to succeed. Very few kids do succeed even though they don't have the parents support with them. Like good baseball players and good football players... And some come from very rough backgrounds. But they succeed because they really are working towards the goals. And I think it's even harder for my children to go into the schools and let's say - be elected for...to be on the honor system or...

BECHTEL: Student council...

RIVERA: Student council and things like that because the people who are already there have had their brothers and sisters there, and now they go tight up. I don't have to name names to know that that president is going to be elected again. And not because he's not a good president, but it's because the family name carried him through. And it's a lot of support from the parents. I find that tremendously good with high school kids, because they do need a lot of parent support and you try to give them all you can. But I think that there is a deficiency in the Hispanic families trying to help their youth. Yet, they will be good students and they will take part in a lot of the school things. Now, my daughters have all been in cheerleading...I was a cheerleader when I was in high school. I was in Dutch Dance - I was the first Mexican Dutch Dancer around. (laughter) So, I don't feel licks I'm being put on the spot, or my children are. If they don't succeed at it it isn't because I have not given them support, or something or other, but they come back with some of the things..."Well, Mom - you know they've got it made. They've got all the votes counted..." Or it's just like anything else. If those kids are
going to get on the Queen's Court, who's going to be already elected - or selected? They already have their groups already geared up. But I guess in that, you always can get your own groups going, too, if you really want to. It's the only way to do it. But they seem defeatist. They will check in with defeatism, I think, a lot. Or say, "No, I'm not even going to try because I know who's going to make it. We know who's going to make it, Mom." And at Honors Assembly too, when I go I'm very proud of the few Latinos that do get out there and get scholarships and really try. And the parents give them support. And I think in the last five years I would say that parents have been more supportive than ever with their kids in high school. They're winding up at the baseball games, they're going to football, and they're supporting the girls - to anything they want to do and to the extracurricular activities.

BECHTEL: From the contact that you've had with your children, would you... do you get the impression that there are cliques, say, in the high school that would exclude kids simply because of migrant backgrounds, or whatever?

RIVERA: Oh, yes. The dirty word right now at the high school is, "You're a migrant." That's like calling a black something else...

BECHTEL: Yes...

RIVERA: And it hurts. It really hurts the kids that do come from backgrounds that they are Spanish speaking... although, maybe their parents have never been migrants, right? But it just keeps them in that same category. And, it's sorry to say, but that is what... And it is cliquish. It was when I was in high school, OK? We knew which groups we were in, right? And it was hard to break into a cliquish group. But the cliques are still there. But now I think they're more with emphasis on, "Don't get him in because he's Mexican," or "He's a Spick," or something like that. That comes on a lot stronger now. And they have had quite a lot of wars
in junior highs...

BECHTEL: Really?

RIVERA: Oh, yes. The girls seem to be more into it. I was really surprised when I was...when I visit the high schools to find that that's going on. Counselors will tell you that. And I'm so sorry to say that there are no Spanish speaking counselors in the schools. I really am. I think that, when I vowed to myself when I went back to school that it would be to go into counselling...help kids that are dropouts. Our dropout rate is just fantastic in our district. They don't make it.

BECHTEL: They've got a lot working against them.

RIVERA: Oh, definitely. And all they need is one little thing to really go wrong one day and that's...that puts the icing on the cake and they quit. There's no support for them to come back. And I think if we can get Latino counselors in our schools that they would help out, because there are a lot of Spanish speaking in the schools now.

BECHTEL: What exactly do you mean by "wars," and what do they revolve around?

RIVERA: Little fights. And it's cliquish and it's spiced with little games where they call themselves this and they call themselves that and then they get out on the playground or out in the open and they have verbal and then physical fights. And if you talk to Jim Zeedyk and Mr. Lightfoot up at the high school I'm sure that they can give you some background on that. But I was very surprised at the junior high level they have a lot more problems than they do at the high school level. The kids are just growing up and all you do is just get called one dirty name and that's it...the girls all gang up. Girls are fighters. I...you know...I don't know that...you know, we should be proud of that or not, but at least they're
sticking up for their rights. And it might be for the wrong reasons, but sometimes...and they don't realize it, but they are doing that. But there is some...there's quite a lot of that going on. And I wish that, you know, there was something that people could do about it, but it's kind of hard to do.

BECHTEL: Yes. It's a big thing to tackle it sounds like. The roots are very deep.

RIVERA: Yes, right. And if you come from a rural family, like where you've had fifteen kids in your family and you're going to junior high, and...

BECHTEL: You know how to stick up for yourself?

RIVERA: Yes, right! You learn that. You just don't sit back in a corner, and if you do you're going to get lost. It's...you've got to fight for your rights, and I think that they do. And if their backgrounds are a little bit...that they weren't happy backgrounds to begin with they've got a chip on they're shoulders already in fights for themselves to be recognized in the right way. But, I don't know, I encourage my youngest son who's thirteen now to be a policeman now at junior high. "Ahh," he says, "I wouldn't be a rat fink," and all that stuff. That's noted as...you just shouldn't be into those things because you'd be ratting on all your friends. Which is really comical because he wanted to get into that at one time and he just lost complete love for that after he got into junior high. But I think if there were enough people to really help these kids out...they really need to be helped in the junior high first, before they even hit Holland High senior years. It's pretty difficult for them to remain in the tenth grade once they have had a constant background of, you know, bad grades for one thing. That will discourage most of those kids. Some of them need one to one all the time - which is impossible.

BECHTEL: And I think from my experience, junior high is where the cliques first
begin.

RIVERA: They first begin there and they go on to Holland...

BECHTEL: And they just solidify as the years go on.

RIVERA: Yes, as they get older... the kids get older. But the cliques will always be... I don't think that you can ever get rid of cliques.

BECHTEL: What about the role of women here in Holland in the years that you've been here? How would you say it's changed in both the Hispanic community and the community at large?

RIVERA: Yes, I think it's changed quite a lot. I think that with knowing that we have a woman Commissioner has helped, and women trying to run for Council posts - of course, having Bea as a woman councilwoman. That really has helped out the woman to say, "Well, I can go ahead and do this on my own." And I think a lot of women are going back to school. They really believe that this education bit is really in and they should get it first before they try to get a handle on something else. I think that has helped out tremendously. I think our Latino women are really feeling themselves very important, too. I think we want to go ahead on whatever's good. For what they've seen that isn't good up to now. And I think that they know that they can change it. And I think women in politics is beautiful! I think out of my seven children I would say my - Maggie, who's a cheerleader in school has been the most active one... going out and really pursuing something like that, because she really gets involved with McGeehan at the high school...

BECHTEL: Well, she certainly had a role model!

RIVERA: Yes, right. And of course, McGeehan keeps telling her that too, but she's enthusiastic about that. And I'm hoping that two or three from my family would get
into the political scene. My oldest son Marco Antonio is in Corpus Christie - he has been in the ministry for years.

BECHTEL: Really?

RIVERA: He graduated from Holland High, and then while he was in the ministry already he went on to go to Albuquerque, New Mexico...and they're really into ministry to help young...I guess students, or young people get a grip on life and know what they want out of life and go...either go back to school or do something constructive for themselves. If they're into the drug scene they help them out quite a bit. And both he and his wife, who have a...like a house in Corpus - they open it up to Bible study and all that. He's been very enthusiastic in it and he wants to try the political scene also, on the side, too...as far as... He likes Corpus Christie, Texas there. They've never been in Texas, right?

BECHTEL: Yes...

RIVERA: As they grow older they move back eventually to exas, but... He said the last time I visited him that he would like to try to run for some political thing later on. But Hispanics are not recognized yet. And that's...that's three quarters Spanish speaking out in the Texas towns, you know. But they really don't get involved because they don't...they really can't, you know, at this point. But, you know, I think getting good people involved in politics would be very helpful.

BECHTEL: Yes.

RIVERA: And my other son Mario in in La Joya, Texas. He married a Mexican girl from one of those border towns out there and he's very happy out there. He's got two children and he just recently went back to college. He's in his first...he started this January at Pan Am. - where I went in Edinburgh. And he's going to transfer to Ann Arbor over here. He wants to pursue a career and be a lawyer, so
I'm very proud of that fact.

BECHTEL: Yes.

RIVERA: And I have two gals who...my two daughters are both in college. Margie is in her third year of college at Lake Superior State College pursuing a social service...you know, a social...with sociology as a major and psychology also. And Monica, who just graduated this June from Holland High has a scholarship and is going to the same college that my other daughter went...my daughter Margie's at. So, I'll have three in college this year, plus myself - you know, I never quit college. I just keep on getting credits and such.

BECHTEL: Are you going in for any particular type of major, or...

RIVERA: Well, sociology is still my major and I do want to go into that kind of work. And counselling - getting my masters and so on - possibly going into that later on. But I have to wait a little bit before my children...my thirteen year old gets a little bit bigger and then...you know, he'll be on his own more or less after eighteen. And then I'll have more free time. But, I don't know, I've always loved college. And I've been in it ever since I can remember! (laughter) My children started at the Holland Day Care Center...

BECHTEL: That's a nice setup!

RIVERA: It's a nice setup - I love it! I loved the year and a half when I went back and I really challenged myself because...here I was, out of school for a long time. I had taken courses off and on but I really wanted to pursue it. And I thought it was a really...experience for me...going to school. You're just like a regular student, you know. And a lot of people didn't know I was married and had seven children and all that good stuff. It was really a surprise to some people to
find out that there are older students going back and they're not recognized yet. But that was OK, because I didn't want to be recognized as, you know, the oldest person on campus. But I got very involved with things going on in Texas. I worked part time which didn't help out too much, but at least I got to know a lot of people in Texas. I found the political scene to be...almost harmful. You really can't get involved in political things out there unless you have a lot of money. And you might be Latino, but you have to have the means to do it - the means to buy votes. It's very important... So it's really hard.

BECHTEL: How does a woman in an Hispanic family conceive of herself? You know, her role there? Has that changed at all in the last few years?

RIVERA: It's changing very slowly. They still conceive themselves as being in the home, and aren't really arguing about too many things. Just being the person who has the food ready and the children clean and the house clean and...

BECHTEL: And yet many of them seem to work.

RIVERA: Now, yes, because of the high cost of living thing. In the last two – three years they are forced to go out in the work force. The husbands may not have wanted their wives to work ever, but they're seeing now that they're forcing them to go back, more as if the women really wanted to go back and help out. And they do. A lot of women are working; their work force is terrifically high. And of course, with the high cost of living you can't make it on one income. Even though it's high, you just can't make it - raising children and putting them through school. It's very hard. I really believe it is.

BECHTEL: Do you have any other thoughts you'd like to add?

RIVERA: Oh, I don't know...give me a little head start... The schools are one of
my top priorities. I feel that schools have changed in the last years also, but they need to change more. They need to gear themselves more to...for the Hispanic junior high student that's growing up. I've talked to the principals and the assistant principals and they are concerned. They would like to see more Latinos graduate from colleges and go into counselling and then have them where they see five applications they know at least two are Latino and they say, oh, they really want to help out in this and really consider them. But there hasn't been. You know, they're all unknowledgeable of the people they know that have been here in the community. And the people who come to apply for jobs here - they really don't really want to stay in Holland, Michigan...they think it's too quiet, it's too reserved, it's different than a Texas town or someplace like Detroit, Michigan...and things like that. I mean, they'd rather go to a place where possibly making more money would be more useful, too. And I guess that's one of the cries I here - that, you know, you have Latinos who are graduating but they go on to other things. Washington, D.C., you know, has jobs that are open for Hispanics that are graduates. Just, you know - open...wide open. Lansing and, you know, bigger towns - and they pay very good money - comparable to what you would make here. So I can see that once they graduate and they've gotten through the college finally and then they get offered a job with less money they're going to take some other job where there's more money. So, we do lose out on that, but I think encouraging parents to be more helpful to their children is... And it's growing. I see more at PTA meetings and other meetings I go to. I see them into the music department. I've never been so suprised as when I went to...all my daughters had played in the bands - they all played the flute, so... I have always been interested in the band, being a band booster thing, so... I was was really very surprised that the last time I went there there was...more than half was Hispanic parents there.

BECHTEL: Really?
RIVERA: So, one of the things is music to them, and they love to see their kids in bands. And kids play guitars, they sing beautifully...so I think they're encouraging their kids a lot more than they were years ago. But I would like to see more of that. And everywhere I go I get on my soapbox... You've got to keep up with your kids, you've got to really encourage them, you've got to go to those things where they want you to go. And I think that Hispanic kids think that is would be embarrassing for them to take a mother who speaks complete Spanish and things like that. And they don't generally want to do that, but... I think they're getting more into where they can speak Spanish out in the open and feel comfortable. Because I think as I was growing up - like in Crystal City where I went to school, I remember we spoke Spanish outside on the playground and at home, but we were not to utter a word in Spanish in the classroom. And that was in Crystal City, Texas. And, of course, there was a lot of prejudice going on in Texas towns at the time when I was growing up - when I was that young. I remember the signs... I remember Eddie's Bar out here...you know, that was one thing I'll always remember... I was very young, but...Eddie's Bar and a couple of bars downtown always had "No Mexicans Allowed." Now those signs were very open.

BECHTEL: You remember those?

RIVERA: Oh, yes. In Texas towns it said, "No Mexican and No Dogs Allowed." Like in either stores or bars or restaurants or something. I remember those, and I was growing up in those days. So you do remember that there was something that said, you know, "This is prejudice!"

BECHTEL: It was very blatant.

RIVERA: It was very blatant. It's like the Blacks who come from the South...and in those years there were a lot of signs that said, "No Blacks Allowed" at all.
"You can't come in here - you're a different color." And I think what I love about working with children is that they don't distinguish color. They don't know what color is. And the only reason they know is because somebody older than them comes up and says, "Oh, did you know he was Black," or, "Did you know he was Mexican?" And then, you know, they say, well, "He's the same, you know, to me...he's a friend of mine." But adults seem to tend to go that route with younger children. It's unhealthy, I think, because children are so clean in spirit that they don't identify color, you know, color lines.

BECHTEL: And they're so impressionable.

RIVERA: Yes, impressionable. If you've been around children they really come out with some neat things.

BECHTEL: They immitiate, too.

RIVERA: Immitate, yes.

BECHTEL: What would you say your main goals in life have been?

RIVERA: Well, one of the main goals was to raise my children and of course, my youngest is 13 now. And it has been a very rough road, I can tell you that, with trying to go back to school, and working full time, and doing other things like being community minded. It really is hard to keep up sometimes. And then, running for councilwoman and all that... But I think one of my main goals is just to keep on getting my degree in college...I mean as my major thought right now - as soon as my son gets old enough then I can do it... But other than that we have...I mean I have other things in mind. I have... I'd like to see more Hispanics getting into the schoold...the Council, and getting really interested. The ones I've talked to were so busy. Well, if you know Alfredo Gonzales, he's just got things that you
can't imagine he's into...like state level and community level. And it's very hard for those people to really keep on getting more put on them, as I can feel with myself sometimes with my family. And I feel that other people who have the time and the money and whatever to go on to better themselves here, it would be very good for them to get into the systems. But I don't know, there's a lot of goals that I have...I just... I love to travel. Let's see...1970, when my Mark was almost a senior here I just took off with my six children and went to live in Mexico. I saved very few pennies to go, and I worked. I had the book, *Live In Mexico on Five Dollars a Day*. I did it for less than five dollars a day. But I checked into school systems, and Saltillo, Mexico was the town I picked out. And I just decided it was time my children learned Spanish. They were very, very confused about language. They would speak only English, and if we would talk to them in the Spanish...and I've always tried to talk to them in Spanish... They didn't want to speak the language - they didn't. They said they were embarrassed by it - they didn't want to tell people that they knew Spanish and things like that. So I figured one of the best things I could do was to drop them right in the center of it - you either sink or swim. And we got them into public schools down there and they went six months down there and they went six months and they did beautiful. I think out of six children I had problems with two of them that...really, it was hard for them to learn the language. But right now you could say that if you converse with them in Spanish they know exactly what you're talking about - they can answer you in Spanish. They could not do that before. I was very frustrated by the fact that they couldn't do that. And here, you know, my mother's still speaking Spanish, I'm speaking Spanish, my husband is completely Spanish speaking and the kids didn't want to speak the language. If they were they felt like that was something they really didn't want to come out with. But I can truthfully say that my family is bi-lingual now. So, you know, I'm very proud of the fact, and I wish
that more parents would take more pride in that...that the language...they have to keep it in the home. They have to keep it going somehow for their grandchildren also. But I think it's one of my goals, too, is to keep it going in my grandchildren as they get older, and not to lose it, even though they move from here to wherever they go...not to lose their background.

BECHTEL: Well, thank you very much for your time. This has been really an invaluable and informative interview.

RIVERA: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.
INDEX

Beechwood School – 3, 8
Bell Telephone Company – 10
Brady's Farm – 22
Comprehensive Employment Training Program (CETA) – 19-21
Crystal City, Texas – 1, 6, 7, 45
Dempsey, Dr. Jack – 23, 25
Department of Social Services – 20, 23, 25 32
Gonzales, Alfredo – 10, 46
   Enis – 9, 10
   Tomasa – 10
Grand Valley Collage – 21
Holland City Council – 29-32, 46
Holland Day Care Center – 16-18, 20, 21, 24, 32, 42
Holland Furnace Company – 15
Holland High School – 8, 11, 35-42
Holland Junior High School – 8, 38, 39
Holland Migrant Center – 17-21, 24-27
Head Start Program – 34
Helping Our Youth Program (HOY) – 35
Hope College – 16, 34, 38
Lake Superior State College – 42
Lightfoot, John – 38
Lithabar – 1
McGeehan, Al – 40
Michigan Economics for Human Development (MEHD) – 21
Milliken, Governor W. G. – 25
Pan American University – 16, 41
Rivera, Magdelena M. – 40
   Marcel A. – 15, 46
   Marco Antonio – 15, 41
   Marguerite Marie – 41
   Mario Luis – 41
   Monica Luz – 42
St. Francis De Sales Catholic Church – 8
Scholten, Dr. Gene – 15
Van's Pines – 22
Westrate, Bea – 30, 31, 40
Zalenka's Farm – 22
Zeedyk, Jim – 38
Becky exemplifies our traditional Holland and our growing Holland.

VOTE RIVERA
SECOND WARD CANDIDATE
HOLLAND CITY COUNCIL
NOVEMBER 6, 1979
VOTE FOR ECKY RIVERA  
CANDIDATE FOR HOLLAND CITY COUNCIL

AS A REPRESENTATIVE ON THE HOLLAND CITY COUNCIL, BECKY RIVERA CAN ARTICULATE HOLLAND'S TRADITION. HER WORK AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WILL BRING NEW INSIGHTS TO THE DAILY ISSUES BEING FACED BY A GROWING HOLLAND.

SHE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

WHY AND HOW WILL BECKY BE A GOOD AND EFFECTIVE REPRESENTATIVE TO CITY COUNCIL FROM WARD TWO?

A Holland resident for more than thirty-five years, Becky knows the city's history and its potential. Because she understands city government, she can help shape a bright future for Holland.

Becky believes that only through sound planning and effective city management can Holland continue to be a model city.

Becky also believes that City Hall needs to listen to the opinions and recommendations being made by all residents.

As a product of the Holland Public Schools and a parent of four children attending Holland Public Schools, she has a personal interest in the continuing prosperity of the entire Holland community.

BECKY'S WORK AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WILL ASSIST HER WHEN DEALING WITH ISSUES BEFORE CITY COUNCIL. SOME OF THESE EXPERIENCES ARE:

**Political**
- Appointed by Governor William G. Milliken to both the Michigan Board of Education's Education Committee and the Comprehensive Health and Planning Commission

**Community**
- Boy Scouts of America, Advisory Board
- Hope College's Upward Bound Program, Advisory Board
- E. E. Fell Junior High School, Curriculum Committee
- Western Michigan Sub-Area Council on Health Systems, Advisory Board
- Y.M.C.A., Advisory Board
- Ottawa-Allegan Substance Abuse Program, Advisory Board

**Church**
- St. Francis De Sales Church Council
- St. Vincent De Paul Society
- Altar and Rosary Society member
- Lutheran Guild

**Professional**
- Holland Day Care Center, Program Director
- Headstart Summer Program, Parents' Committee chairperson
VOTE FOR BECKY RIVERA
CANDIDATE FOR HOLLAND CITY COUNCIL

Becky Rivera,
like all of us,
has a stake
in the prosperity of Holland.

She believes
that she can provide the necessary input
toward making City Council
a more responsive body of elected officials.

Becky
asks for your vote
on November 6th.

VOTE REBECCA A. RIVERA
HOLLAND CITY COUNCIL

Paid for by The Committee to Elect Becky Rivera to Holland City Council, 261 West 13th Street, Holland, Michigan 49423.
Rebecca A. Rivera, 44, is mother of seven who is seeking, for the second time, to gain a seat on Holland City Council as representative of the second ward.

Rivera has political credentials that include appointments by Gov. William Milliken to the Michigan Board of Education's Education Committee and to the Comprehensive Health and Planning Commission. Locally, her background has extended into these same areas as well.

She has been a resident of Holland for 35 years and is the program director for Holland Day Care Center, which is a part of Holland Area Child Development Services. Rivera is also still going to school, with an ultimate goal to receive her degree in counseling.

Because of her long residency in Holland, Rivera believes she knows the city's history and its potential, and that only thorough sound planning and effective city management can Holland continue to be a model city.

She approaches the job with the idea that city hall needs to listen to the opinions and recommendations being made by all residents.

During an interview, Rivera said she is running for the second ward seat because she has been a part of the community and wants to be a part of the planning of the city.

A prime area that she views as in need is senior citizens. The city is growing, she said, and it is important that private and public housing be provided for them.

Low income families and senior citizens on fixed incomes, she said, should be eligible for housing that is subsidized. She said she would support the proposed housing development at Hope Avenue and 16th Street, because of the needed housing that it provides.

On downtown development, Rivera said the city should provide an encouragement role. She stressed that Holland's downtown is beautiful and that the city should encourage the development of the core city.

Rivera views growth as good, as long as it is planned and as long as there is proper citizen input.

She stressed citizen group involvement in many aspects of government and said there should be a commitment of the citizens to get involved in this planning.

Concerning special projects, Rivera said some of them are needed to enhance the city. She said she supports the stadium and De Graaf Nature Center projects, but that approval of these projects depends on what the city really needs.

She favors projects that beautify the city, but said council should be selective about the projects that it approves. They should also be publicized, she said, so that citizen input is a part of the decision-making process as the city grows.

"What is important," Rivera said, "is to keep the cultural heritage of Holland alive."

The management of the city, Rivera said, should encourage efficiency and there should be better communications between departments. Each department, she said, should be encouraged to inform the public and to seek citizen input.

When asked if she believes the taxpayers are getting their money's worth on their tax dollars, Rivera said Holland's Dial-A-Ride (DART) transportation system should be improved. She said she supports an expansion of public transportation.

She also said the city does not do a bad job in providing its services, but that there should be constant incentive to make the city operate better.

In the community, Rivera has been involved in the Boy Scouts of America, advisory board; Hope College's Upward Bound Program, advisory board; the E.E. Fell Junior High School Curriculum Committee; Western Michigan Sub-Area Council on Health Systems, advisory board; Y.M.C.A., advisory board; and Ottawa-Allegan Substance Abuse Program, advisory board.
I am a candidate for the Holland School Board which is having its elections on June 11th. I am among the 5 candidates who are seeking to fill two vacancies and positions of responsibility.

My platform is based upon what I feel are serious community concerns as well as being my own personal concerns. These are the provision of hot lunch programs within all public schools, and the upgrading of educational opportunities for disadvantaged students (which Latino students are overly-represented).

I strongly adhere to the belief that the basis of a successful and smoothly running community depends upon the emphasis of a sound and well-thought-out program of education. Because of my desire for good educational opportunities for all children, I am greatly dismayed at the unusually high drop-out rate among Latino students. I know I have the facilities to intelligently provide input into administrative decisions in an effort to reduce such a drop-out rate.

My concern for educational improvement is not solely based upon ideals but is that also of a mother with 7 school children within the district.

Within other communities, I have personally seen the end results of an educational system which has its doors closed to the needs of disadvantaged students, ....disadvantaged to the extent that much more community involvement was missing. In such communities, the end products are usual community strife and disunity, leading to increases in expenditures in dealing with social problems.

If elected as a member of the Board, I hope to influence Board decisions in favor of progressive programs which benefit not only bi-lingual students, but all students. It is further my hope to serve as a consolidating link in the chain of communications between the Latino community and the School Board.

In the same manner and respect that community opinion should influence a board member's decision...in the same sense of duty and responsibility to one's conscience in decision affecting the community...it is this same frame of reference that I sincerely hope you may support my belief in pulling together, in the same direction.

Respectfully yours,