Reyes, Lupita Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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(Beginning of the interview - side A)

AP: For reference now and in the future, I would like you to state your full name.

LP: My full name is Lupita Reyes.

AP: Current address.

LP: I live at 16415 James Street in Holland.

AP: And date and place of birth.

LP: (Laughing) Date and place of birth?

AP: (Laughing) You don't have to say your date, but I'd like the place.

LP: Place of birth is Blue Town, Texas, and my date of birth is [date removed], 1937.

AP: Now, Mrs. Reyes, you don't have to answer the questions, also you can talk about anything that you would like about your memories, and I know that you've done this before. So,
it's up to you with what you want to do. I know you have experience. If you want to add to any of the questions that I have, that would be great.

Where did you originally come from?

LR: Originally, I came from La Feria, Texas, which is a few miles away from the Mexican border.

AP: Was it an urban or a rural area?

LR: I would consider it a rural area.

AP: In what year did you arrive in Holland?

LR: About 1945.

AP: And how many people came with you?

LR: Originally, my stepfather came ahead, and my mother and I stayed in Texas - La Feria. Then, he sent for us later on and we came in a truck, and there were several people. In my own family, it was just my mother and myself, and my dog, and the rest of the people. There might have been maybe fifteen people in the truck. They piled us up in the back of a truck, and it had a canvas on it, and we traveled. It seemed like days and days before we got here.
AP: Before arriving to Holland, describe what you expected to find.

LR: I was a child, so I really, I don’t think I had many expectations. I had a lot of reservations because I didn’t want to leave my hometown. It was very difficult for me to move away, and I knew, as we were leaving my town, I’d never see my town again. That’s the feeling I had at that time, and the only thing I had to cling to was my dog. My dog became my favorite companion. So, I had no idea of what Holland was like. I really didn’t.

AP: When you arrived, can you describe your first impressions of the city?

LR: Oh, when we arrived we arrived at a - it’s a basement type house just on the east side by the Heinz company, and they dropped us off there. It was at night, so I didn’t really have much of an impression other than going to this building, going to the basement, and waiting for my stepfather to come and get us.

But, when I got to the home where I was going, the
first person I saw was this little blond haired girl with blue eyes and long pigtails, and speaking a language I had absolutely no knowledge about. She said something to me, and I couldn’t understand her, but, I think, the idea that she wanted to play came across. And, of course, I got off the truck, and proceeded to go into the house, and she stood out there, and it was dark yet. Then my mother told me, "You can go outside for a little while." The little girl was still standing there, and she was trying to talk to me and I couldn’t talk to her. So that friendship didn’t last very long that day, but we did become good friends.

AP: Describe your first place of residence in Holland.

LR: First place of residence in Holland was on East 9th Street, very close to the end of East 9th Street. Ninth Street comes to a dead end, just east of Lincoln Avenue. I think the address was 169 or 269 East 9th Street.

AP: Now, did you live close to that friend with the blond hair?

LR: Yes, she lived across the street.

AP: And do you still keep in contact with her?
LR: No, I don't. All I know is that her name was Barbara Harding, and I've lost contact with her. I know over the years, we have all gone our separate ways.

AP: Can you describe the neighborhood?

LR: The neighborhood was a fairly nice neighborhood, nice houses, and a lot of kids, and that's about it: pretty nice neighborhood.

AP: And, why did you come to Holland?

LR: I didn't want to come to Holland, remember that. It was my stepfather who came ahead, and had an opportunity to work in a factory which was believed - during that time, was called Northern Woods. It is where Freedom Village now stands across, or has been built on that. I believe Baker Furniture use to be there, but it was Northern Woods, and it was a furniture company. That's where my stepfather came to work, and that's the reason we came here was for better employment for my stepfather.

AP: So, can you describe some of the conditions in LaFeria?

LR: Conditions. It was a poor bordertown. Small. Even to
this day, it's a small town. Employment opportunities were not the best. I think, my mother had to work, cleaning houses, and we were not making it. My stepfather had an uncle who lived here in Holland, and had correspondence with him, and told him, "Well, if you come here, you'll have a better job, and a better life." He [LR's stepfather] and my mother decided this would be the place for us to come to because we were not making it in La Feria. We were very poor. So, the decision was made.

AP: So, you went to school here.

LR: I went to school here, but I started school in LaFeria. And then, was pulled out of there and brought here, and my first contact with any public school in Holland was Lincoln School. It was a very sad time for me because I didn't speak the language. I didn't understand it. I spent a lot of lonely hours sitting at a corner just feeling sorry for myself. I think that's the way you would put it. Feeling sorry for myself that I couldn't understand the kids, and that I felt they were making fun of me because I couldn't
talk to them. So I didn't participate in many school activities, like recess. I didn't play with the other kids.

AP: You sat in the corner.

LR: I sat in the corner outside the school. When the bell rang, I ran inside, and stayed to myself most of the time.

AP: How many years did you attend school in Holland?

LR: I attended school in Holland throughout my school years. Not being able to speak the language again, I was held back a couple times. There came a time when the teachers had decided that I had a learning disability, and I was going to be put into a special class for children who had learning disabilities, retarded children.

One teacher decided that that was not my problem, and she said my problem was that I didn't understand the language. This teacher began to work with me, and to teach me how to speak English. She devoted a lot of time to me. Her name was Miss Bennett, and she was considered one of the meanest teachers. She was a very good teacher, but she was considered one of the meanest teachers in the
Lincoln School. She was a principal, as a matter of fact. She took a liking to me, and worked with me very hard, and spent a lot of time with me. I began to blossom, and by the end of third grade, I was speaking English quite well. By the time I was in junior high, English was my primary language, I believe.

All through high school, I didn’t have any problems, not problems with the language. Okay? Other problems? Yes, problems of fitting in, those came along. That’s a different kind of feeling because you feel excluded, and you know that the reason you’re being excluded is not because they don’t want you. It’s because of your ethnicity, or the color of your skin, or the language you speak, and that was one of the reasons I was excluded from a lot of things.

So, I graduated from Holland High School in 1959, much older than the other kids, but I graduated. Then I got married, and stayed out of school for a while because I thought, "I’m not college material anyway." That’s what my counselor told me: that I didn’t have the grades to go to
college. Then I decided to go to college, and here's where I am right now.

AP: What are your impressions of the development of the school system? Have you kept in contact maybe with the news; or developments since you graduated; bilingual education?

LR: I certainly do. To me, education is very important. The development of the educational system is important to me, and how it impacts upon children who come from other ethnic groups, not only hispanics, but the Asian children and other children who might come from other countries. I believe the development has been slow. We have a good bilingual education program in the Holland Public School Systems. We have some kind of a program in the West Ottawa Public School Systems, which is mainly for migrant children.

I believe that a lot more has to be done. I believe that schools need to change their attitude about how they educate. Many schools are in the business of educating. They seem to forget that the person that needs to be educated has to have some say-so, and so what schools do is
teach a certain way. If that person doesn't fit that mode, then they are termed to be uneducable: you can not educate this person.

AP: Learning disabled.

LR: Right, they're learning disabled. What we do is label people instead of looking at ways of educating them. If they can't learn one way, we need to look at possibly a different way, and making that person a productive person rather than dependent on society, and that's what we've done with many people.

So ya, I follow the school systems very closely. I've never become involved in the politics. I've had the opportunity to seek a seat on the school board. Once you're on there, it kind of cuts your wings a little bit, and then you become controlled by the system, and if I'm not controlled by the system, I am able to say more. Rather than, if I'm on the school board, I have to watch what I say and do, because, after all, you just can't come out and speak against the system. Anyway, that's the way I see it. Maybe I'm wrong,
but I believe that once you sit on the board, you have certain controls on you, and you’re not able to say the things the way you can if you’re not part of that board. That’s basically the reason I’ve decided not to get involved politically in the school system. Not that way, anyway.

AP: Can you tell me a little bit about the employment that you’ve had here in Holland? Maybe your first job?

LR: (Laughing) Oh, my first job: picking blueberries, pickles - migrant. Even though my stepfather worked in a factory, for a time there we did have to go out and work in the fields, because he got laid off. So we picked cherries, and blueberries, strawberries. We followed the crops. We even went to Ohio to pick tomatoes, and I wasn’t too happy with that.

But, as I got older, one of my first jobs was working as a waitress in a restaurant. I looked a little older than my age, so I was washing dishes in this restaurant, along with my mother, because my mother worked there. I was twelve years old, and by the time I was thirteen years old,
I was waiting on tables. So that was one of my first jobs, and I liked it because it gave me the ability to work with people, to talk to people. I’ve always enjoyed meeting people from different places. So, that was a job, and then I worked at Heinz during the green season, like a lot of high school kids did.

One of my first bad experiences with a job was after I was married. I applied for a job at JC Penny Company here in Holland. The manager said, point blank, "I’m going out on a limb by hiring you, because we don’t hire Mexicans." But he said, "I’m gonna take a chance on you." I felt rather strange, I almost felt like saying, "Well, then I don’t want the job," but I needed it. So I took the job. Then afterwards, I did very well. I was a good salesperson. The counselor was right: I’d make a good salesperson.

Then I went to work as a legal secretary for a local law firm here in Holland, and liked that, but that wasn’t what I really wanted to do. I wanted to do more, so I began to volunteer a lot. Everytime I wanted to apply for a job
that had any kind of training, they'd always say, "Well, you’d do well, but you don’t have the education." That’s really what made me go back to school is I didn’t have the education, so I decided to go and get it. Knowing well that I didn’t have the ability, according to the counselor, to go to college, I went ahead and did it anyway.

AP: Can you describe your employment now, and maybe even the schooling that you had to do to get this employment?

LR: Currently, I’m the clinical manager of patient and family counseling, at Holland Community Hospital. My job entails running the department; interviewing future employees for the department; preparing a budget for the department - something I don’t like to do, but I do it; the discipline of the department; keeping the department at the level of quality that it is; so being responsible for the department, really. Then I carry a case load, and so that means that I am just like one of the other people in the department, and I have to do discharge planning; death dying counselling; anything that comes along that fits into this department,
and I'm able to do it.

Kind of training for this, I have a bachelor’s degree in social work from Grand Valley State. I have a master’s from Western [Western Michigan University] in clinical social work, and I also have certification in substance abuse counseling, so that helps with this job. Just to add a little icing on the cake, I’m getting my masters in management through Aquinas, and that’s also to help me be a better manager of the department.

AP: Do you belong to any organizations?

LR: I belong to Latin Americans United for Progress [LAUP]. I am on the Holland Community Foundation. - I’m on their board. Because of school, I’ve purposely have declined to be on some other committees, because here, within the hospital itself, I’m on several committees. At this time, I can not afford to be on anymore committees, or I wouldn’t get my studying done. Once I finish with school, then I will feel very free about donating my time, and being on committees, or organizations. I feel that it’s important to give back
to the community, and that is my way of doing it.

AP: Now have you been a member of any other organizations before these?

LR: Yes, I’ve been on the United Way board, Women in Transition board, Community Action House, Good Samaritan, just to name a few.

AP: You’ve been quite active.

LR: Quite active, right.

AP: What kind of activities do you do in the organizations that you are involved with?

LR: In Latin Americans United for Progress, I was one of the founders of that organization. The organization originally was The Latin American Society, and then it grew, and merged with another organization and became Latin Americans United for Progress. I’ve served as a president. I’ve served as secretary to that organization, and fundraising committees, and all kinds of committees. I’ve served in many capacities. Then the other ones, as board members.

AP: And as a board member you -
LR: You contribute your input as to how you feel certain things about the organization and what it should do for the community. I don’t believe in being on a board, and sitting there and just rubber stamping everything. I will question, and when I join an organization, I join an organization to be of service to the whole community, not to the Hispanic community. Therefore, I don’t wish to be on any organization as a token Hispanic. I want to be on an organization as a working member, and when I mean working member, I mean for the whole community.

So I’m going to look at things as, depending on the committee I’m on, like United Way, would be how they disperse their monies to different organizations within the community that need their support. Holland Committee Foundation, again, it’s how do they disperse their monies to organizations that benefit from their help. So, I really take being on a board, or being on an organization, a member of an organization, very seriously.

AP: Over the years in Holland, can you describe some of the changes you have seen in the Hispanic community as it has
The biggest change, of course, is the size, or the population, of the Hispanic community. When I arrived here, there might have been, maybe, five families. Today, Holland's population of Hispanics is approximately one third of the population. So, that's a significant growth in population. Also, when I arrived here, most of the Hispanics who were here, were from Texas, and a few from Mexico, and maybe one or two from Puerto Rico. Today, there are people from Central America, and Mexico. The influx of people from Mexico has really been significant, and then, of course, from Texas.

Hispanics, at the time I arrived here, were not very involved politically. They tended to stay to themselves: go to work, come home, and that was it. Today, you see Hispanics involved in the educational system, in politics, and that is, I feel, very significant. It also demonstrates that Hispanics are no longer just willing to sit by and let things pass by. They are going to take an active part in
their community, and that's very important.

AP: Do you have any comments about, maybe, any changes in ethnic traditions, assimilation?

LR: Ya, certainly over the years, I see more and more Hispanic children losing the ability to speak Spanish. It's sad, but it has happened. However, lately I see more and more Hispanic kids trying to regain control of their ethnicity. There's more pride in being Hispanic. Kid's are no longer ashamed to say, "I am a Mexican," or, "I am Hispanic." There's a sense of pride in that. The music - kids are taking more part in the Hispanic festival, and in school activities they're willing to bring out the Hispanic story. So, in that way I also see a change where kids are beginning to come back, and I think in the past they went away from it. Basically, for the same reason that I did is that speaking Spanish in front of non-Hispanics, people would look at you strange, as if you were from some alien world. People would make funny remarks about you. So, you tried to hide the fact that you were Hispanic. You tried to be as
non-Hispanic as possible, so you could be accepted.

Today, I think young people have the opportunity, more today than they did then, to participate in school activities and the fact that they’re Hispanic is not why they’re excepted into the football team. It’s the fact that they have the ability to play if they’re into playing football. I mean, when I pick-up the sport’s page, and I look at the number of Hispanic kids playing for Holland High School football team, I say, "Hurrah!" This year the number of Hispanics that graduated from high school was just great - it made me feel so good, and so proud, because it indicates that those of us who are working for that goal to have young people take that educational opportunity and run with it. It’s working out. It’s paying off, and it’s worth all the work we put into it. It’s worth it.

AP: What about employment, do you think that there’s been a change?

LR: There’s been some changes, small ones. I believe that there are many people, not all, employers, in this area that look
at a Hispanic and question whether or not they'll be able to perform. You don't see many Hispanics in upper management. You see a lot of Hispanic supervisors, but in the upper management level you don't see that many. I also feel that Hispanics have a responsibility to get themselves prepared to be able to bid for those jobs. When you bid for a job, again, pretty much the same reasons why I belong to boards, I don't want to be a token Hispanic employed. I want to be a person who is employed, because I can do the job, not because I'm Hispanic.

I think a lot of employers will find a Hispanic and push that person into a position they're really not qualified for. When that person fails, that employer turns around and says, "I told you so, these people can't do the job." Instead of really looking for a qualified person, who has the qualifications, they want to cut corners, because it's cheaper. So, they cut corners and take someone who really isn't prepared, and I don't mean educationally prepared. I mean experience wise.
To be a manager of a department, you have to know about budgets; you have to know how to prepare budgets; you have to know about people skills, and listening skills, and communication skills. You just can’t take a person off an assembly line and put them into a management position without giving them the support. If you [don’t] give that person the support, meaning the emotional support, the educational support, so that person can succeed, that person’s going to fail. No matter how good that person is, if they don’t have those supports behind them, they’re going to fail. Then what happens is that the person will believe that they’re no good, and then they’ll just fail at everything else. So, it’s important for employers to keep in mind that when they do promote someone from one of the lines, that they give that person the support needed to succeed. When they hire someone who has the educational background, and all the background that they need to be and upper management, that they give that person that support. Support is very important. Otherwise you just set people up
A lot of times too, I see employers who will take Hispanics and expect of them double, double the work. "You're Hispanic, therefore you will be our interpreter for the firm, for the company." So, you're expected to be the trouble shooter. Anytime anything goes wrong within the company with Hispanics its that person who's thrown out there everytime to smooth things over, and really that's not that person's job. Pretty soon that person becomes overwhelmed by all the responsibility put on them. That they either quit, or they say, "I don't want this job. I can't do it." It really isn't that they can't do it. It's that they have been asked to do far more than what another person, a non-Hispanic, would have been asked to do in the same position.

AP: Have you seen any changes within the tensions, maybe, between the Holland community and the Hispanics? The Hispanics are part of the Holland community. But between Hispanics and non-Hispanics?
LR: The tension is not as overt. I’m sure it’s there. It’ll always be there. As long as people are alive, there will always be tension. You know, we call it discrimination, but I think a lot of times it’s just ignorance of the other people. You’re afraid of the unknown and, therefore, you’re not going to get close to something you don’t know anything about. It’s just like food. There’s some food I won’t taste because I don’t know what it tastes like. So, I have these misconceptions about how some particular food might taste. So, I won’t even get near it. I won’t even taste it. Yet, if I gave myself the opportunity to taste the food, I might have a different view of it. That’s the same with people from different cultures. We are so afraid of them, and I think it’s were afraid of how are we going to act, because we don’t know how to interact.

We have in this community, as in many other communities, a lack of cultural sensitivity. Not only to Hispanics, but to any culture. There might be people from the South coming in. We have this fear, and so when we’re
afraid of something we tend to make fun of it because it’s the only way we can cope with it. If we can make fun of it, then we’re in control. But if we don’t, then we’re no longer in control, and the other person, or the other ethnic group might have control, and we’re so afraid of that.

So, it keeps us from doing things like the Hispanic Festival. This year for the first time in its twenty-seven years of existence, I saw many non-hispanics coming through. That’s good because it’s beginning to breakdown that fear that we have of each other, and we’re finding out that we’re not so different. We enjoy the same things. The music might be different, and the way we talk might be different, but we’re a fun loving people. So people are coming out to our festival, and enjoying it. They’re not afraid of us anymore. It’s slowly coming around. Not everybody is going to buy into it, and that’s true of anything. But I think that, if we keep working at it, we’ll tear down some of the barriers that exist. We will not tear down all of them. It would be foolish to think that would happen.
It will not happen in my lifetime, but differences have been
around since the time of Christ. People have been
discriminating, or afraid of someone that’s different. I
mean, why was Christ crucified? Because people were - what
were they? They were literally afraid of him, because he
was different. Anyway, that’s my view of this whole thing.

AP: Can you describe some of the major challenges you
encountered as you were growing up?

LR: The major thing was the fact that educationally I was not
given the opportunity to succeed. Had I been someone else,
had I been a different ethnic, or a different color, spoken
a different language, I might have had a better opportunity.
I didn’t have those opportunities. I didn’t have the
opportunities to develop good study skills like other
children have. I was judged as this person is not going to
succeed, so let’s not spend a lot of time on her. What can
you expect? I mean, that’s basically what I felt. Maybe it
wasn’t that way, but that’s how I felt, that’s how I was
treated. Those were hurdles to me, and hurdles to overcome.
My self-esteem certainly was not intact. What happened to me in school developed me as a person with very little self-esteem, because I didn’t think I could do anything. To this day, I question my ability to do things. I mean, I look at myself in this position right now. I am the manager of this department, and yet I question my ability. That all goes back to my childhood. The teachers telling me, "You don’t have what it takes." That is what happens to children when you constantly put into their mind, "You don’t have what it takes. You’re not good enough." So, you develop that. You incorporate that into your thinking, and so you’re constantly questioning. Did I do this right? Am I really the right person for this? And I am, because I wouldn’t be in this position, if I didn’t have the skills. But, yet, I question myself. So those are hurdles, that I have to jump every single day of my life, I think, I will have to work towards, because I’ll never overcome them. Those are scars that are ingrained in me psychologically, and I can’t erase them.
Some of the pain that you feel of being told, "No, you can't have a job, because we don't hire Mexicans." That is ingrained very deeply, and sometimes I catch myself talking about some employer or something, and I realize that it's my own anger at what happened to me. Then I have to step back, and realize that I'm not dealing with me, I'm dealing with a whole different situation. Those are things that I constantly have to check myself on.

AP: I usually ask people about any racial tensions that they've encountered, or anything that they would like to talk about. You don't have to, but if you want to.

LR: Oh, you don't have to tell me I don't have to. I will because it was one of the things that really hurt me a lot. Several years ago there was a particular person on the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners who made a very racial remark about hispanics. We got a group together, and we brought this up to the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners, and pointed out why this was a discriminatory remark. Indeed, everyone agreed. There was a lot of media coverage.
However, I started getting mail, in my mailbox, telling me to back off or I would have a cross burned in my front yard. I had letters telling me, "Why don't you go back to where you came from?" That hurts, because I came from the United States. I am an American and to be told that I wasn't, that I needed to go back to Mexico, that was painful. Then to think that in Holland, Michigan, there were people who thought that way.

Then, it made me think twice about every -. You know, there are so many churches in this town, and when I was a little girl we were very poor, and subsequently I went to some of these churches so we could get some clothing and food. I was taught by those churches that you are equal in His sight: red or yellow, black or white. And yet when this happened, I realized that the people in this town, many of them not all, were mouthing the words that we are equal. Because in their eyesight, we're not equal. And that you're only equal is if you keep your mouth shut and you except their way of doing things, their way of living. At that
particular time, I remember telling somebody, the Constitution of the United States guarantees me the right of freedom of speech. Doesn't tell me that I have to speak it in English. I'm able to speak what I have to say. So, I guess being an American to me is one of my most valued rights. When someone tries to take that right away from me, I become a little feisty, and then I fight back with everything I can, and that's with words, because I don't believe in violence. You can not achieve anything with violence, but you can with words.

I think the only way you're going to educate people is through words, and by saying to them, "We are all working toward the same goal. We want a good community for our children." That's what we need to look at. We need to look at the gang violence in this town. The drug culture in this town. We need to look at those things. Not the fact that we're black; that we're hispanic; that we're Dutch; or, whatever. We need to look at the problems we have in our community, and work together to resolve those problems. Because they're not going to get resolved just simply by
saying, "Well, they’re the Mexicans over there. It’s there problem," because it isn’t. It’s a community problem.

AP: When I first wrote this question, I liked it. But, as the interviews have gone on, I have not wanted to ask the question, but I have to see the response. What do you feel the hispanic community has to offer Holland? And, what has it offered in the past?

LR: What has the hispanic community got to offer Holland? A wealth of cultural history that can make this community even greater. What it has offered to this community is that many of us, who have lived here for many years, are giving back to this community. We’re giving back through our experiences, and working to make this a better community, and that’s what we’re doing. We’ve given teachers. We have police officers. We have put our shoulder to the grind when the going got ruff to make this a better community. That’s what we’ve been giving.

Again, I wish we could just say, what have we all got to offer this community, and let’s forget that people are of
different ethnic backgrounds. Let's say, "We as a people, here's what we've got to offer." It's like, when you make a soup. You know, if you're making vegetable soup, you're not going to get a good soup if you just add the meat. You've got to add the carrots, the potatoes, and all that wonderful stuff, and then you have this wonderful tasting soup. Well, that's the way we've got to do with making this community. We've got to add the hispanics, the Dutch, the German, all the ethnic groups we have here, to make this wonderful, cultural soup. Then, we can work together, to make it a beautiful tasting soup, and then offer it to the whole community.

AP: That's why I don't like the question, because -.

LR: But I think it's a good question. It brings out the fact that we need to look at the contributions, and we realize that the contributions don't necessarily have to be made by the hispanics. The contributions are made by the people who live in this community. We need to get beyond thinking of, "Well, what did the hispanics contribute?" Holland,
Michigan, is a town that was settled by the Dutch, and the Dutch have contributed much to this community. The architectural design, certainly the Dutch ethics that are here, the work ethics, and a lot of those ethics are good. The hispanics have, incorporated some of the Dutch values into ours. And so, we can't throw those values away. We incorporate them to make a better community, and that's why we need to incorporate what the hispanics have to offer. We just need to work together, and maybe that's Pollyanna thinking, I don't know. But I sincerely hope that we can work together to make a better community, and that's really what I work for.

AP: Do you feel that there should be some changes within the city?

LR: Ya. Changes within the city. We need to understand that entertainment, for instance, for hispanics is not the same as entertainments for the non-hispanic. You know, our music is different, and, therefore, we need to have the opportunity to enjoy our cultural and social events just
like anybody else in the community. However, that opportunity isn’t as easy for us. I mean, how many hispanic movies do you see here in a year? The Arts Council certainly has the opportunity to bring some art works of hispanics. I have to go all the way to Chicago to go to a Mexican museum to see some of this stuff. And why do I have to travel all the way to Chicago? I love to go to Chicago. But the other people in this community don’t have to travel all the way to Chicago to see cultural things, to see some cultural event, a dance, or something presented by a dance company.

The hispanics always have to pay to bring in their own cultural things, like the Ballet Folklorico. It costs a lot of money to bring that. Now, a hispanic organization doesn’t have that kind of money to bring that in, and yet how often do you see the Ballet Folklorico being presented by Hope College, or by the Holland Friends of Arts, or whatever.
LR: What I was saying is it can't be all ninety percent activities for the non-hispanic, and maybe, once in awhile, we'll think about other activities for the other people who live in this community. It's got to change. Tulip Time, for instance, is a wonderful time. It's the best opportunity to bring in the cultural diversity in this community. What a wonderful way to show visitors that Holland, Michigan, is composed of not only the Dutch culture, but other cultures.

I've been following the paper that Tulip Time has lost money in the past. Well, let's change that. Let's take the blinders off our eyes, and begin to look at different ways to put some spice into Tulip Time, because Tulip Time is losing money. If we want to change it, then we have to draw people here with different things, and what better way to do it than to demonstrate the cultural diversity in this community. We have the opportunity, but we don't take that opportunity.
AP: Can you describe some of the things that you see in the future for Holland and its community? I guess it will depend on decisions that are made now.

LR: That’s right. Right now we have a hispanic person on City Council, and that’s a minute little change, and I’d like to see more people of different ethnic groups in there. Again, I want to get back to that fact that I want to see people serving on City Council, on the County Board of Commissioners, up in Lansing, wherever, not because they are hispanic, or black, or whatever, but because they have the ability to represent the community in the way it should be represented. That is what’s so important.

The fact that the person is hispanic or whatever ethnic background is a plus, but it doesn’t mean that that’s the only reason this person is on council. And, unfortunately, that’s the way some people look at it. Well, this person that we have on City Council right now many people will say, "Well that’s only because he’s hispanic." That’s really unfair to him, because that person really has the ability to
be on City Council. He’s very intelligent. He has the best
interests of the community at heart. He really does, and we
have to give him credit for that. And the same thing with
Luciano Hernandez, up at Ottawa County Board of
Commissioners. It’s not because he’s hispanic. It’s
because he really has the ability to be there, and he
certainly deserves to be there. He was elected.

So, those are things that I want to see some changes in
the way we elect people to give them a better opportunity.
Right now, if a hispanic runs, their chances of getting
elected are very nil. And that’s basically because people
have blinders and they’re looking at, "That’s a hispanic
running. We might get a hispanic running our community,"
and that’s all they look at. That’s the only issue. They
don’t look at the fact that this person might be able to do
a very good job, but they don’t give that person the
opportunity simply because of their ethnic background, and
that’s sad.

What else would I like to see in this community? I’d
like to see more activities for young people. We certainly don’t have them. I mean, we have the Boys and Girls Club, and that’s good. But that’s not enough, because not all kids want to go there. We have to have other activities for kids. We have this huge Civic Center, and we’re saying, "Well, let’s build another one, because this one, right here, is too small, and it’s going to be for our children."

Well, I remember many many years ago when the Civic Center was being proposed, and that’s exactly what it was for. It was going to be for our young people. Who uses that most of the time? But older people. And so, our young kids are running the streets. We have to do something for the young people in this community.

We have to look at ways of retaining kids in school, because they drop out like flies. They really do. We need to re-examine the way we are teaching, and that goes back to what I was saying in the beginning. We have our black and white book. What it says in the book, "This is the way we teach, and God forbid that we teach a different way." We
say, "We’re on a track. Kids are programmed. They’re programmed to graduate in four years." Why? Whose convenience is it? It’s the school’s convenience. So what if a kid takes five years to graduate? It’s okay, because that kid is going to gain something, he/she is going to be a productive citizen of this city. But sometimes we discourage these kids. As soon as they’re sixteen we can say, "Ya, you can drop out of school. Doesn’t matter. I mean, you’re a troublemaker."

One of my biggest gripes is when kids are expelled from school. They’re expelled from school for [things like having a pencil in their pocket. Obviously they have to follow rules, but kids who want to get kicked out of school, who want three days vacation, get themselves caught with a pencil sticking upside down in their pocket. I’ve seen kids expelled from school for having a pencil in their pocket. Now, what purpose does that serve? No purpose. It gives a kid a vacation. It also makes the kid three days late with homework. The kid gets behind, loses any kind of incentive they have to go to school, because, "What the heck! I’m so far behind now, why
go back?"

And so, we need to change our ways. We need to make school for the way it's intended to be for the student not for the teacher's benefit. A lot of the times, if you look at the ways schools are setup, they’re setup for the system. They’re setup for the teacher, and their rules, "We have to get a certain unit done by this time." Well, whose benefit is it? It’s not the students'. It’s the teacher’s benefit. She/he has to get all their little blocks of teaching done at such a certain time. It’s programmed so that the teacher can get what he or she has planned for the year for the student, and we take the student right out of it. The student has nothing to say about it.

AP: Do you have anything else you’d like to add?

LR: Oh no.

AP: Can you describe some of the traditions you celebrate as a family or as a community, and if those traditions have changed as you’ve been in Holland?

LR: Some of the traditions we celebrate are the Quinceñera,
which is a fifteenth birthday for girls. Now they’re for boys too - I understand. The weddings are pretty much the same as they were when they were in Mexico, and in Texas.

Christmas, funerals, although funerals have changed some. I mean, when I was growing up, I can remember some of my friends whose father had died. They wore black for about six months or so, and, today, it’s no longer done that way. Today, after a funeral, it’s customary to go back and have food. Well, when I was growing up, that wasn’t done. I mean, we would have velorio, and then we would have a time where after the funeral for five days or fifteen days after, we would say the Rosary at the home of the person who died. We don’t do that anymore. Those are traditions that are changing.

Certainly, I think, that has a lot to do with where we live, because I think if we were in Texas it might be totally different. As you get closer to the boarder it would be very different. But those are traditions that my family would celebrate, pretty much. I try to do that
because I want my children to grow up with that knowledge, and with those traditions, and I want to pass those traditions onto them, so they can continue those. Because if we stop doing that, those traditions will end, and they're beautiful traditions, and they need to be carried on.

AP: Do you think that the traditions have changed because of assimilation?

LR: Yes, they have. I believe that some of the traditions have changed because of assimilation. And again, it's where we're at in that assimilation. If we were in Brownsville, Texas, and we celebrated Quinceñera, we'd celebrate it pretty much like they do in Mexico. But we're up here, and access to some of the things that we need for the Quinceñera are not that easy. We have to go to Chicago. Now we're getting a few stores here in Holland that can provide us with those things. But it's expensive, and if you're in the boarder you can just get that stuff very cheaply. The Quinceñera dress, and everything that goes
with it [are very expensive. I think a lot has to do with the availability of things for the event, and assimilation.

AP: Would you like to add anything else?

LR: I look at assimilation as - when someone becomes totally assimilated, you sometimes have psychological problems that come with that, because you can never totally assimilate. I mean, you can speak the language, just as I do. You can get involved in the activities that are non-hispanic, but the other person, the other group, that you are trying to assimilate into might not accept you, not totally. So, you're kind of in limbo, and then you begin to have depression, and you begin to have substance abuse problems, and all kinds of other problems that come along with it. So, I think that assimilation brings a lot of its problems that we aren't beginning to deal with quite yet.

AP: Are you involved in a church?

LR: I am Catholic. I'm very involved in St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church. I even served on Parish Council there for awhile. I attend Mass regularly, and, as I said before, I'm
not too involved now because of school but once I finish
I’ll go back to the same old thing again.

AP: Has your religion, or your faith, if you want to talk about
that, changed in your life as you’ve lived in Holland?

LR: My faith has not ever changed. Well, I can’t say that it
hasn’t. It’s stronger now than ever, even though when I was
a child, my mother made me go to non-Catholic churches for
trying to get food, and trying to get clothing. I resented
those churches, because, to me, it was, "I will help you,"
but there was always a string attached to it. For a long
time there, I had a bitter feeling of those churches, and a
lot of times when I would speak to groups, I used to make a
comment about the fact that if you’re going to help your
brother, don’t put a string to the help that you’re giving.
If your going to help, then be free about it, and say, "I
will help you, because you are my brother in Christ. Not to
make you come to my church."

So, today, my faith is stronger. I’m very Catholic. I
even have a thing in my door that says, "This is a Catholic
home," because I don’t want people coming to my door and trying to preach to me. But having been exposed to that, I’m very respectful of other people’s religion. I believe that, if you tell me, "I am very Christian Reformed," I respect that, and I’m not going to try to convert you to Catholicism, not for one iota, because I believe you have a right to your religion. Trying to impose upon you my views of Catholicism would be very unfair to you. So, in that sense, I would say, "Ya, there’s been some changes."

AP: How do you perceive the religious development of other hispanics from the time they arrived in Holland?

LR: When many hispanics arrived here in Holland, it was predominately Catholic. Today, you see all these little churches popping up here and there. A lot of those people, who are in those churches today, many of them, were Catholic, and I’m not ashamed to say that. I will tell our priests, "Father, we have turned many of those people away. Because when they came to us for help, we did not give them the help they needed." We turned them away,
and so they went to where they would get the help, to where somebody excepted them with open arms."

That’s one thing I have to say about the churches in this town is that today they do except you and they want to help. They really embrace you when you’re hurting. Sometimes the Catholic Church has not done that, and I’m the first one to say that. So, the development of those churches has been through the fact that the Catholic Church has not always been there for them. But there again, some other people who’ve come in, who developed those churches, have been very aggressive about getting their congregation up and moving. They’re very progressive in what they’re doing, and I believe it’s good. I feel that people need religion, and that if it’s not Catholic, and if they need to turn away from the Catholic Church in order to get their spiritual needs met, then so be it.

AP: Why do you feel that the family, or the extended family is so important for hispanics?

LR: That has been for as long as the Mexican history has been.
If you read into the history of Mexico, the extended family has always been the support system. I believe that is one of the reasons why it’s so important, because it is a support system. We don’t need to go to a counselor. We can have our own support system. I can go and talk to my madrina, or I can go and talk to my tía about my problems, and she’s going to give me the support I need.

I believe as we get further and further away from the border that support system becomes even more important, because we just can’t go across the border and ride over the bridge and say, "Grandma I’m here. I need to talk to you." So, when it’s way over here, several thousand miles away, it’s going to become even stronger, because that’s who we can cling to. That is our touch with our ethnicity, and we’re going to cling to that. The same thing with language. Hispanics cling to their extended family, and their language, and their religion. That’s real important to them, because it’s something they have control over. You can’t make me speak another language if I don’t want to. I
will speak Spanish. I have control over that, and my extended family is something you can't take away from me. They will always be there for me. You can take my car away. You can take my home away, but you can't take my extended family away. They'll be there for me, and that's why they're so important.

My religion, you can't take that away from me. My religion will be there as long as I live. Even people who have turned away from the Catholic Church, for instance. When they're dying, I see them here in the hospital - the first thing they'll say is, "Get me a priest." It's because maybe they've changed religions, but in their heart they never changed being Catholic. So, I often have to get a priest for somebody, those are things you can't take away from people. You can make them change, for instance, the way they speak. You can make them change religions. Those are things you can take away from them, but in their heart you can't. They still have control of that. And so that's why those things are so important.

AP: You have children.
LR: I have children.

AP: Yes, but their grown. Can you describe your family, a little?

LR: I have two sons and three daughters. One of my daughters just got married last week Saturday, and she married a hispanic, traditional Mexican wedding. Then my other two daughters are married to non-hispanics. Then my one son is married to a hispanic, and then my other son is going to marry a non-hispanic. So I have a very mixed family. Even though there is a mixture, the traditions are always there. They’re there, and the kids maintain those traditions.

We’re a very close family. We cling together a lot. We visit each other a lot. My kids live in pretty close proximity to me, and whenever there’s a problem they’ll call, or they’ll come to the house. They’re all out of the house now. But if something happens, I mean if you say one of my kids comes to the emergency room, all I have to do is get on the phone; call one of them; and all of them will be here for that person, for the one that’s here. So, we’re very open and our communication is very open, very
supportive toward each other.

The daughter that got married, just this past weekend, speaks Spanish. The other four speak some Spanish, and that’s because they were raised around me, who speaks English most of the time, but that wasn’t the reason. The reason was that before they started school, the schools had always told hispanics that if their children didn’t speak English, they couldn’t go to school. So, that was something that we made ourselves do is speak English, so that the kids could go to school. We didn’t want to deprive them. And then having gone through what I did, I didn’t want my kids to go through that. I wanted them to have an opportunity I didn’t have. So I spoke English to them.

But one thing I instilled upon them was the hispanic culture. My kids can talk to you about the hispanic culture, and tell you a lot about it with pride, and that’s something I instilled in them.

AP: What were your hopes for your children when you first started to have children?
LR: My hopes for my children were initially, as I just said, that I did not want my children to have the kind of life I had had. I wanted them to have an opportunity to achieve; to be able to go to college if they wanted to; to be able to get a job, because they were a human being not because they were hispanic they were turned down. I wanted them to have a good life; to be able to buy a home; to be able to do many things that I couldn’t do. So those were my hopes for them, for them to achieve, and to be happy. Those are still my hopes for my grandchildren, and I don’t think that’s ever going to change. And that’s my hope for all children that will come from many ethnic different countries, that they are given the opportunity to succeed without being prejudged. That’s really my hope for children.

AP: Would you like to share something about your life for generations ahead?

LR: For generations ahead. My philosophy of life is that you can never get anywhere without a good education. Education is a key to success no matter how you want to succeed, you
have to have the education. If you don’t have the necessary tools to get ahead, you’re never going to get ahead. And the only way to do that, is to get an education. You can’t sit back, and feel sorry for yourself, and say, "I am hispanic. The teachers don’t like me." If they don’t like you, that’s their problem, not yours. They have to deal with it.

You have a responsibility to yourself to do the best to succeed, to get educated. If the teacher doesn’t like you, then that’s just part of it, but you have to go learn ways to get around that and there are ways, and that you don’t let anyone take your dream away from you. That you take your dream and go with it, and don’t let anyone tell you can’t do anything, because you can. If you really try, if you really want to, you can do anything you set your mind to, and I’m living proof of it.

(End of the interview)