11-5-1997

Cortes, Gladys Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Geoffrey Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/ses_holland

Part of the Archival Science Commons, and the Oral History Commons

Recommended Citation

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/ses_holland/26


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Interviews at Digital Commons @ Hope College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years" by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hope.edu.
Oral History Interview with
Gladys Cortes

(unedited)

Conducted November 5, 1997
by Geoffrey Reynolds

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

GC: My full name is Gladys Teresa Cortes, and I was born in Chile, South America, on July 30, 1940.

GR: Could you tell me the city in Chile?

GC: Antofagasta.

GR: When did you first come to Holland?

GC: We came to Holland in 1977, on June 8th, and sometime in August, this past summer, was twenty years.

GR: Did you come with anyone else?

GC: My husband and our five children.

GR: Your husband’s name?

GC: Eliseo Cortez.

GR: Could you name your five children?

GC: Roxanna, Hemenah, Christian, Ivan, and Claudia. Three boys and two girls.

GR: Are your children still living in Holland?

GC: Only one. The other four are not in Holland anymore. I have three in Grand Rapids, one in Monroe, Michigan, and only one in Holland.

GR: Describe your first impressions of Holland, when you arrived.

GC: Well, I came from a big city in Chile--Santiago, which is the capital with over five
million people. Then, twenty years ago, Holland was a small town, very quiet. My first impression, well, this was one of the impressions that it was a very quiet, small town compared to what I was coming from. But, my first impression was during the summer. It was beautiful. It was full of flowers, the lake, sunny, a lot of green. It was really beautiful. That was my first impression. We came to Chicago first. We came directly from Chile to Chicago on June 18, and we were there only for a month and a half. Then we moved here because we came to visit one of my husband’s sisters, and I fell in love with Holland. It was so beautiful. Plus, my husband’s aunt were telling me how bad it was Chicago. It was a big city for us, having five children. Then, when we came to visit my sister-in-law, I got in love with Holland. So really, my first impression of it was as a beautiful town, very colorful and very nice. But, at the same time, when I got here, I noticed that it was a very small city compared to Santiago.

GR: What are some organizations or activities you’ve been involved in?

GC: I was involved with LAUP organization, which is Latin Americans United for Progress. Being in the organization, I was the program director for the Mexican Fiesta in 1979. I was involved with Hope College in a Mexican art exhibition in 1984, and I was the project director of the Mexican Art Exhibition representing LAUP organization. I was a member of the planning committee for the first Hispanic women’s leadership conference in Grand Rapids. I was a member of the educational committee for LAUP organization, and I’m still a member of the education committee for scholarships. I was a member of the Lady of the Lake Catholic Church, a board
member for Good Samaritan Center, a board member for Women in Transition, and also, a long time ago, I was a member of the Bilingual Advisory Board at Grand Valley State University. And, in Grand Rapids, also, I was involved in other activities with a Hispanic center.

GR: Since you’ve come to Holland, what have been some of the most significant changes you’ve noticed?

GC: It’s growing very fast. A lot of houses, more people, a lot of diversity because now people from all over are coming to Holland. There’s a lot of jobs here, a lot of companies. Then, besides its growing, it is making Holland more diverse. I see people from different races.

GR: What do you think caused some of these major changes?

GC: Like I said, major changes because there is too many factories and companies and things here that attract people from all over. Before, when I came here, it was like all Dutch people and Hispanic people--that was the main two groups. Now I can see, it’s people coming from other states and other cities that are nothing to do with Dutch people. That is making it more diverse because it’s also people from other countries. I belong to a group which is called International Women, and they are all people from different countries.

GR: Have you been involved in any of these major changes do you think?

GC: Well, probably, but I have to figure out how. I was working with the community. I can’t think of it right now.

GR: Have any of these changes affected you directly, as a person?
GC: Well, the only way it could affect me more directly is that Holland is going to be more diverse now because of people are from all over. I think it would be good, then, it's not just going to be pointed on just two groups, Dutch people and Hispanic people. It’s going to be more mixed together. I think it will be better. It will all work together for making Holland...

GR: What are some of the other cultures that you’ve noticed coming to Holland over the years?

GC: A lot of German people, a lot of people from different Indian countries, people from Denmark and other European countries too.

GR: Holland has been recognized as one of ten All-American cities. What qualities do you think earn Holland this honor?

GC: For me, I am very happy in Holland because it was the right place to raise my children, a very nice place. Like I said, it was small and quiet, but it was the perfect place. And, even though Holland is growing too much, and a lot of things are changing, I think it will still be a nice and quiet town compared to other cities, like Grand Rapids, for an example, that is close to us. Still, it is a very nice place. That is one thing. The other thing is that people from the community are working very hard to make this town look beautiful in the summer time. A lot of people are coming from all over for summer time because of the lake, because of the marina. And then, as you know, the people from Holland are always trying to make this town very comfortable and beautiful.

GR: What things does the community still need to work on? Any negative things?
GC: One of the things Holland probably needs to work on is, to work more on the...Here are people from different countries and it’s more easy to make the connection between people who live in Holland and people from Europe. I would like to see the same connection with Hispanic people because I think Hispanic people are doing a lot of things for making this town. Now, being a progressive town and a beautiful town, and a good town. Probably one other thing, it’s not negative, it’s just something that has to be done. There are a lot of people that don’t know exactly, when they say Hispanic...I’m using the term Hispanic, but sometimes they use the term Mexican, they forgot that the Hispanic people could be coming from twenty or more different countries. We all speak Spanish of course, but we have different cultures and different living styles, different customs, different foods, different things. And in Holland, I know there are Hispanic people from different countries, from Mexico, from Central America, from South America. Then, probably just to know more about the Hispanic people. It’s not just Mexican people, because that’s true, they can’t identify all of the cultures. To have more information about it, to know more, to be aware of all the Hispanic people in Holland, from where they are coming. And then you will see it as a lot of different countries.

GR: Describe the role the church has played in your life, if at all.

GC: When we came here, my husband and I and the five children, we came with just a suitcase and some clothes, that was it. We had to start all over. After sixteen years of marriage, we had to start here, all over. And then the church, the role that played for us was more spiritual because we started going to the church just to say thanks to
God for whatever we were achieving, and we still do that.

GR: How did you decide to join the church you are currently involved with?

GC: Well, we are Catholic, and we were looking for a Catholic church. At that time, it was St. Francis de Sales. We went to St. Francis de Sales just from the beginning, but then when Our Lady of the Lake started here, then we started from the first day at Our Lady of the Lake.

GR: What role does the church play in Holland, as a city, community, and at the college, in your opinion?

GC: Well, I know Our Lady of the Lake Church is working on different capacities. In this north part of the town, we have a lot of migrant people, and Our Lady of the Lake is also working with migrant people. Migrant people, those workers who come to Holland during the summer time or spring time, and then they go back to Texas and come back. So, they live here, say seven months or eight months, and four months in Texas, and they come back, and they want to go to the church. Our Lady of the Lake and St. Francis de Sales together, they try to give them the service, because those people only speak Spanish. So the church has to be available for them. I know that they have Mass on Saturday evening when it’s all in Spanish. The church is also very involved with the community. I don’t know about what the church is doing in the college. I have no idea.

GR: Has this changed since you’ve been in Holland? The community involvement in the churches?

GC: Probably, because the church is trying every year to do different activities and
improve things. I'm sure it is changing.

GR: As you see it, what role does Hope College play in the community? Do you have much connection with the College?

GC: Some connection. Hope College has a lot of activities that involve not just the students, but the community as well. And also, students from Hope College are teachers, and I know the students from Hope College do some internships in the schools around here. The students have different activities when they go to school or when they go to other different places. Hope College has a nice program called Upward Bound, where they give a lot of services to the students in the community.

GR: What school do you teach at?

GC: West Ottawa Middle School.

GR: And what type of teacher are you there?

GC: I'm working with the migrant program. I'm providing academic support to sixth, seventh, and eighth graders.

GR: With bilingualism?

GC: Not necessarily. The majority of the migrant students speak English. Very, very few don't. But the majority speak English. But, if there is one or two students that do not speak English, I can talk to them in Spanish, but not necessarily because they have also a bilingual program. It is a different one.

GR: Could you state your heritage again, what country you're from?

GC: All my family, we are all from Chile, South America. All of my children were born there. My girls are twins, and when we came they were fifteen years old, and my
boys were five, seven, and ten. My younger was five years old, and they range from five to fifteen.

GR: Do you see your heritage playing a role in the Holland community? Being from Chile, do you see that playing out as a community?

GC: Yes, I guess, because when we just came, and I was barely learning English, a lot of people asked me to go for those...not Boy Scouts, but girls.

GR: Campfire Girls?

GC: Yes, go there and talk about Chile. All the time, I was at one of the schools, talking about Chile. People were interested to know more about it.

GR: Now, are there other families with a similar Chilean background?

GC: Yes, in Holland, there is a lot of families.

GR: Can you tell me how many?

GC: Let’s say, people probably will be like...thirty people. But, families, not too many because they are all related, you know. Like, if my kids stay there, we will be five and that’s six families living in Holland, but that happened with another family. They got married and they live in different houses, but belong to the same family. But, the family-family will probably be like five...six families.

GR: Where do they usually live in Holland? Is there an area that they concentrate on?

GC: No. All over. There are people in town, and there’s people just north of the town, and there are people by Waukazoo, by Lakeshore, different places. All over, not...Even daughters, mothers, and their married children that are not living in the same place.
GR: Holland's diversity as far as ethnicities has been increasing over the past several years. What effect has this increasing diversification had on the community and yourself?

GC: Well, yes, like I said, Holland is increasing in diversity. This is one other change to make, was, ...and this is from my part, as I see it, was the school. The schools over the past ten years, let's say, had to change too, because when the community changes, the school had to change, otherwise they are not working for the community, or they are not serving from the community. There now, have been a lot of changes in the school too. Also in business, you see a lot of little businesses where they offer services specific to the Hispanic people, for example.

GR: How has the role of women changed in Holland over the past several decades?

GC: Well, probably because there's a increasing in too many business and factory, I think in business in specific, a lot of women now are in business. They have their own store, they have their own places. When we came, it was not too much. It was just downtown, and it was mostly men, I guess. I've noticed that from the past, like I said there, ten years, that's a lot of women. Some of my friends have some business there now. There's more opportunity, and...

GR: How about within the family and in the church? Have there been any changes there?

GC: When I came, there was a lot of women involved in the church activity, and they still do. I don't know if there have been changes in the church. And, in the family, probably because a lot of people are working. A lot of women is working. Then probably that would make a big change in the family.
GR: Have you seen changes also in education?

GC: In education, yes, of course. A lot of changes in education. The women that want now, go to college. I have a lot of friends who are adults, and they are studying. They are going classes to go to college. There's a lot of colleges here now, in Holland. Before, it was just Hope College. Now there's a lot of competition! (laughs)

GR: Why do you think that those other colleges have come to Holland?

GC: Because the population is so big. A lot of people were going to Grand Valley, travelling too much to Grand Valley. They were going to Grand Rapids for business to Davenport, for example, and now the enrollment probably was so big that now they've decided to come and bring the services here. Then they don't have to go there. One other example, I got my master's through Grand Valley because I wasn't teaching in my country. When I came here, I continued working in the school, but I took some classes in Grand Valley, and I got my master's of education there. And then years later I was teaching Spanish classes two nights in Grand Valley. I went to the campus, but at that time, I was working in Grand Rapids. For me was more then to go to Grand Valley, and come back here. Now, for example, right now, I am working in Holland, but I am still teaching in Grand Valley because they have Spanish classes offered here in town. They offer like fifteen classes through Grand Valley, and the classes are in Holland High School. And now, I'm still doing the same; I don't have to go to Grand Valley, just go to Holland High School.

GR: So, you're very busy with the language, teaching.
GR: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland, and how do they affect the community or yourself? Anything that you remember that you were upset about or were very positive about, that other people might not have been?

GC: Well, when the gangs started in Holland. There was two things. At first, they tried to say there was not gangs, there was just a group of kids. They tried to... I don't know what was the reason not to recognize them. But, on the other hand, there was people in the community getting together and trying to find a solution. Then, for me, it was a controversy because the people in the community were really concerned, and they were having meetings, and they were trying to see what they can do, how can they solve it. And on the other hand, the police were the ones trying to say, "No, there are not gangs, they're just a group of kids." I don't know what was the reason they don't want to recognize that there's a problem starting there. But, in some ways, they are doing a good job because I don't see that too much now. Probably there still are some, but if that's the case, they're not growing. And, police also are working with schools. They're sending police officers to the school for drugs, and in middle school, we have two officers who are working in the school, which is in a DARE program, which are good things. Probably in Holland, too, they are having the police working together with the school in order to solve some of this problem.

GR: Tell me about a job you've had in Holland that you've really enjoyed and maybe one that you haven't.

GC: Teaching. I used to work with Holland School system before...that was when I just
came. But at that time, I don’t know English, and I started working as a teacher’s aid. I had all my certification, but I didn’t know any English. I had to start from the beginning. I think I was very fortunate to work in the same field. Until I learned the language, and then I started working as a teacher. But, I worked as a teacher in Grand Rapids for ten years.

GR: Did you like that one better than now?

GC: Everything has been different. I’m enjoying all of them. I was working in Grand Rapids teaching third grade. Six years I was teaching third grade. And, four years I was working in the school that is called Academia de Espanol, where we were teaching all subjects, in Spanish, to non-Spanish speaking kids. They start all in kindergarten, and it is still the best school that is there. It is a wonderful program. But then, I got an offer from West Ottawa Middle School, and I took it because that was, I thought, better for me. I don’t have to be driving every...commuting every day. It was a big change. And, I am enjoying what I’m doing now, too. I think everything related to teaching I would enjoy.

GR: How long have you been in West Ottawa?

GC: This is my second year.

GR: So, it’s a recent job change.

GC: Yes, a recent job.

GR: Do you see a perceivable generation gap in Holland? As a teacher, you’d probably know that.

GC: Of course, but at the same time, like everybody else here, there’s a big difference
from the old times and now. The way that we grew up, and the way they are growing up now, at the same time for us is another difference. It’s a culture difference, because all my kids, they started...you know, my girls were fifteen years old when we came, then they had that culture, that style. And, we came here, and we had to all together learn different customs here, different things. Then, of course, I think it’s more than just a gap in generation because there’s also a difference between cultures, between countries.

GR: Do you see a generation gap between your students and yourself?

GC: Oh, yes, of course.

GR: What are some of the things that you’ve noticed?

GC: Well, I think the people a long time ago was really studying. They don’t have TV, probably, they don’t have Nintendo, they don’t have too many things, and the kids now, it looks like, are more involved with TV and those games. I guess school is not a priority like it was before. But, that’s the way. It had to be different. At the same time, a long time ago, we did not have as much opportunity like they have now. They have the technology, now, in their hands. Like me, I never learned to type because I was coming from another country. I never learned to type, but here, I had to do it, but I learned with two fingers only, and I’m surviving with that. (laughs)

GR: Do you think the generation that you teach now is too comfortable, with their surroundings and...?

GC: No, I think they are comfortable. Kids, you know, learn everything. Kids are like a sponge; whatever you teach them, they learn. It’s just for them to have the
opportunity. If we, a long time ago, if we had the same opportunity, the same thing, probably would want that too. It's just a matter of advance of technology.

GR: Have the problems and concerns of the average Holland citizen changed over the past years? Have your concerns about being an adult changed since you arrived? Do you think about different things than you did?

GC: Well, of course, you have to think different now.

GR: How are things different than when you arrived in the U.S.?

GC: When we arrived here, we didn't know the language, number one. Myself, I didn't know how to drive either, and then I found out that driving was not a luxury, it was a necessity. Then, I had to learn how to drive. I had to learn the language, and I had to learn the customs, which was completely different.

GR: What are some of the customs that you remember being very strange or different?

GC: Different here? The only thing I can remember the first day of school with my kids, the very first day, I went to the corner with them to the bus stop, and I gave them a good-bye kiss, and years later, we try to think about it. We remember the things and we laugh. What for them was naturally, for me was too, but later on, we realized that's not the way. No other mother went to the corner and gave a good-bye kiss to the kids, especially when they are in the high school, middle school, and not even elementary. But, when we came, we started looking over and trying to see what it was, and we were looking over, and whatever we thought was good, we tried to take it. Things that I thought was good, whatever we brought from our country, from our culture, we keep it. One of the things that we keep it, and we are very happy for that
is the language. All my kids speak Spanish.

GR: Did you speak Spanish in the home, exclusively?

GC: Yes. And all my kids can speak Spanish, and they are very fluent in English, because English is common. They were kids; they had to learn it, but Spanish is the only way they can take it is from home. They were little kids, and that is not enough. They had to hear more Spanish, they had to grow in with the language too. They are fluent in both languages now.

GR: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life that changed things for you?

GC: Definitely the lifestyle.

GR: In coming to Holland?

GC: Because in my country, I was a teacher, I was working there, but we have there people who were doing things for you. I had somebody who was cooking, somebody was cleaning the house, somebody was doing the laundry. You know, that was pretty easy for me. And, I had the "nanas" who were taking care of the kids. When I came here, I had to do all of the things. That was a big change because at the same time I had to be working here. It was not just staying at home, it was...

GR: That is quite a change.

GC: I knew how to do everything, because in order to be there and tell somebody, "Do this," and "Do that," you have to know how to do it first. I knew how to do everything. The only difference is that I was not doing it. But here, I had to do everything. I'm very organized, and it was not very hard for me, and besides, I remember that I was working for a time, studying for a time, and doing all the things,
and the kids were still little. They were times when I was working from six o’clock in the morning til one o’clock in the morning, again, you know twenty-four, twenty-five hours a day. I remember sometimes cleaning the house at eleven o’clock at night, midnight I was vacuuming the house, cleaning. Because time for cleaning was Saturday, and if for any reason we were going out during the weekend, I had to clean the house on Friday after work, and one o’clock in the morning, we were all still cleaning the house. With five kids...yes.

GR: Has there been a significant person who has influenced you in your life?

GC: I think my husband. My husband has a lot of influence in me too, because, both together, we took this as an adventure. We decided to come, and we did it. Five kids, no money, coming to a strange country, not knowing the language. I think it was a big step that we did there. And between the two of us...sometimes there were times when I was tired and probably depressed, and he was trying to pick me up. And sometimes that he was low, and I tried to pick him up, and between the two of us.

GR: Now, what did your husband do when he came to Holland?

GC: Well, that was one other thing. He had a wonderful position in Chile. He was working with the copper mines. He was supervising the copper mines.

GR: You were talking about your husband?

GC: Yes. He had a wonderful job there, but when we came, he had to work in whatever. Whatever he could find, because he had to, you know, sustain the family. He worked in like two or three different places until he started working with Lifesavers company until he retired.
GR: He’s retired now?
GC: Yes. He’s retired now.

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

GC: Yes, because my kids were little, and then they grew up. Then the priorities are changing. The first were my kids. The first, everything was whatever we were doing was for the kids. Then, all of them get out from high school, went to college, and then, of course, the priorities were changing. Right now, all of them are married. All of them have a career, and now our priorities are just the two of us. It is different. And we have a lot of grandkids now.

GR: How many do you have?

GC: We have eight grandkids. Then, the priorities are changing with the time. For one moment, I remember my priority was trying to get my master’s, for example. Another time, like I said, before was my kids, then I was started studying to get my masters. Then, my other priority was to get my kids going to college, looking all over to see what they want. Then, later, just last year, I graduated again, I took classes at Michigan State. I have a second master’s now. Then, for the last three years, my other priority was studying again.

GR: Are you studying for another degree now?

GC: I already got it, a second master in administration.

GR: Has your faith gotten easier while living in Holland? The Catholic faith, has it gotten easier for you?

GC: Yes, of course. Always whatever you do, God help you. That’s what I think, and
yes, my faith. That helped me to get whatever I want. My positive thinking has helped my faith, because positive thinking for me is the most important thing.

GR: Has your commitment to the community increased over the years? Have you done more within the community?

GC: Oh, yes. Yes, always working within the community. I’m involved right now in... this is my second year back in Holland, working in Holland and I’ve already started working with the Holland community.

GR: What part of the community are you working for?

GC: Mostly with the Hispanic community. Yes, because I was working with a Hispanic community near St. Paul, and now that they know that I’m working here again. They started calling me to get me involved in other things.

GR: Did you like that to happen?

GC: And I like that to happen, but I also am available to work in any other organization. It doesn’t have to be only Hispanic. I can represent a Hispanic community to any other place. But, because I was studying for the past two, three years, I didn’t have too much time to...

GR: No. It doesn’t sound like it. Some of the other topics... What do think of Tulip Time?

GC: Oh, wonderful. I enjoy it. Tulip Time is part of our family now. Years ago when I was working with Holland, I remembered I got my costume and was going in the parade with elementary kids. Then, my kids were going to West Ottawa, they were in the band. My boys were marching in the band, and we had to go there and see.
And, all of it, every year we never skipped a year of going there. As a matter of fact, for the parade on Saturday, my husband goes Tuesday night in some place on Eighth Street and put the chairs there, ready for the parade, and we have a place because all my kids are coming with their grandkids, and my grandkids really enjoy it. This is a part of our culture now. Tulip Time is when the whole family gets together, and we go and watch the parade, and after that we have a big barbecue and we eat all together. We enjoy it; we love it.

GR: How do you think the bilingualism problem in the schools for non-native speakers is coming? Is it getting better, or worse?

GC: I think...better. Even though we have a lot of kids coming with no English, but they have a good bilingual program, and they start learning English pretty quickly. But, that doesn’t mean that they don’t have to speak Spanish. They have to keep the language, that’s my belief, but they are learning a second language. They are learning English. I’m seeing that through school a lot of times. For me, it would be good if the kids speak two languages or more than just one. Then, on the other hand, like I said, in Grand Rapids, I was teaching for four years kids not speaking Spanish, but I was teaching them in Spanish, and they were learning in Spanish. They are going to be bilingual too. Bilingual is any two languages. Either one, if they know Spanish, learn English. If they know English, learn Spanish. I think that would be better because there are over twenty Hispanic countries where they speak Spanish. There’s a lot of business with the Hispanic countries. I think Spanish is the language that a lot of people can do it in. As an adult, as a kid, high school students, they
need to learn Spanish too because whatever they're going to be when they go to college, I'm sure they're going to need it. The Hispanic population in this country is growing too much. And, not only here, also a lot of business is in overseas countries. A lot of Latin American countries. I know a lot of adults who work for a company, and they have a business in a Hispanic country, and they come to me, and they take some classes in Spanish because they want to. They want to say something. I know there's a need for the language.

GR: What do you think of the city government? Any viewpoints on that?

GC: First of all, I really like the mayor. He was re-elected again, and I'm glad because I really like him. We worked together at Holland High School...(end of side one)

From a long time ago, there was a very, very Dutch community. Very, very Dutch. And I say now, like I said before, people coming from all over, coming from different backgrounds, even though they are still American, but different background, they have more open minds, and they see things better. I think that Holland is going to be better and better in that way. We need to accept it.

GR: Do you think the diversification of the City Council is helping?

GC: Oh yes. Yes, of course. In Holland Public School, they also have a big problem in multiculture, which is...People sometimes don't understand because they don't know about it, or people sometimes they are not accepting because they do not understand. It's a lot of things that involve education that we need to be more educated about.

GR: Is there anything else you wanted to add?

GC: Nope, I think that that's it.
GR: That's the end of the interview with Gladys Cortes.