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Rios, Julio Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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LW: Mr. Rios, would you state your full name, where you were born, and date of birth?

JR: My full name is Julio Rios Mirendez, I use both last names because that is part of my tradition in my country to use your father's last name and your mother's last name. My father's last name is Rios, and my mother's last name is Mirendez. But when you come here to America, you need to use only one because sometimes people feel like your father's last name is your middle name; sometimes they have some problem in the past.

LW: Where were you born?

JR: I was born in Utvado, a small town in the middle of the island of Puerto Rico--very tropical place in the Caribbean. My family is a very traditional family like people that you are going to find here in Zeeland and Holland; a country guy was born in the mountains where there are a lot of fruits, a lot of agriculture, and a most beautiful place.

LW: You were born on [date removed], 1950?

JR: Yes.

LW: How long did you live in Puerto Rico?

JR: I was living in Puerto Rico after 1984--I was 33 years when I came here to Michigan, specifically to Holland.

LW: Tell me a little bit about growing up in Puerto Rico. What was life like where you
grew up?

JR: In 1950, it was the development of that island. Puerto Rico is part of the United States. All of the Puerto Ricans have United States citizenship. That means that we are supported mostly by United States of America. My father, at that time that I was born, was participating in the military of the United States; he was enrolled in the military. He went to the war in Korea. I never met my father because he was eleven years in the U.S. Army, and the only recollection I have of my father in the beginning years of my life was my father in the Army sending letters to us and sending photos from Germany and all of those countries that he was participating. My mom was ten years younger than my father, and she was responsible to manage four houses at that time in my hometown. She was responsible for taking care of four children. At that time, it was a very hard, a very traditional Hispanic family where man is running the home, but switching to my mother because my father was in the Army. She was very responsible in terms of reinforcing education in all us. I remember my first teacher was my mother teaching us and helping us with the school homework, and reinforcing you need to finish, you need to do your homework, you need to be responsible. All of my brothers thank my mom that we are professional today because she reinforced education.

LW: Are your siblings all brothers?

JR: I have an older sister that is the oldest one in the home, Aurora Rios. The two other siblings are brothers. From top to the bottom, I’m third child of my family. I have one younger, and one brother older than me. It is very interesting because all of us
are following one year; all of my brothers were born in July. People ask why that was, but that was because my father was in the Army, and he came in just for pass and that was when he had the children (laughs).

LW: Did your other siblings migrate to the mainland or did they stay in Puerto Rico?

JR: Most of my brothers finished their education in Puerto Rico. I have only my older brother, Rafael Rios, Jr., he migrated to the United States because he enrolled in the Army also. Last year he retired from the Army with twenty years of service. He decided to stay in Killeen, Texas; most of his life he was raised there. He came to the United States when he was twenty years old. My youngest brother is a professional; he is a business accountant. My sister works with the federal government in Puerto Rico as a supervisor of the region of the housing and urban development, including all the region of the Caribbean Island.

LW: What was your mother's name and your father's name?

JR: My father's name is Rafael Rios Velez; my mother's name is Feliza Melendez Lugo. They met in Puerto Rico and married there. They had the four children, and they're still together.

LW: They are both still living?

JR: Yes, my father is retired but is still working voluntarily. My mom is a housekeeper.

LW: Do you see them often?

JR: Sometimes they come here to America to visit me and my other brothers in Texas, and sometimes they enjoy coming as tourists to Canada. We have been doing a lot of travelling around here. I think that they know Michigan from the Upper Peninsula,
maybe than most of the people here! (laughs)


JR: In 1984, I was working in Puerto Rico after I finished my master's degree in counseling and rehabilitation. My first profession was BA in education as a teacher, and I pursued my masters degree immediately in the field of counseling and rehabilitation, part of the social worker career in Puerto Rico. I decided to finish that profession. I was working for eleven years; two years with the University of Puerto Rico as a professional counselor, and after that, I moved to work with the department of substance abuse that was created in Puerto Rico in the 1970s. I became one of the trainers to train all the professionals in the field of substance abuse by the National Institute of Drug Abuse, and I became one of the team of training. In the field of substance abuse, I worked in Puerto Rico for eleven years as a counselor, and later I became the assistant director of rehabilitation department or that agency. At that time I was planning to come here to the United States to finish my PhD degree. That was my goal. There was an opportunity that they were looking for some person and some people from Michigan went to Puerto Rico to hire a professional in the field of substance abuse to develop a substance abuse program for Child and Family Services of Western Michigan. That was in 1984. At that time I came here just for the interview to check what was the opportunity and maybe this was a good step for me to improve my language and to continue maybe later on to be my PhD degree. And I moved here. I accepted the position with Fred Groen—he was the director at that time, and he is still the director of that agency. I became part of the team of Child
and Family Services with my good friend Janie Morales, a Puerto Rican, who was working here at that time. With her, we started developing the first Hispanic program for Child and Family Services for the prevention of substance abuse. The Hispanic community was growing in Holland at that time, and there was not too many professional people here. That was why we accepted that challenge to move here.

LW: When you first came, did you focus on substance abuse?

JR: Yes.

LW: What types of things did you encounter when you came?

JR: What was very interesting at that time, 1984, I remember coming to a very conservative, different community. Language was completely different; weather was completely different; the religions believed that I was raised as a Catholic, very active member of my church in Puerto Rico, coming to a minority in everything—in religion, minority as a professional Hispanic. The language at that time was very difficult for me because in Puerto Rico we speak mostly the Spanish language. We are United States citizens, but we do not use English too much. It was a challenge. I found Holland in 1985, was the first Tulip Time parade. It caught my attention, and I felt I was very touched, my feelings, when I saw the people of Holland celebrating the tradition of being of Dutch heritage. I thought if the person of Holland continue with those traditions for years and generations, this is a very nice community and I think they never lost their values and traditions. I believe when people don't lose their values and identity, I feel welcome. And I feel like I have a place for me here. I felt touched at that time because I saw how proud the people felt about their heritage, and
how wonderful the people celebrate and proud of their tulips and their music and their heritage. I felt this is a wonderful place to live, because people are proud of their heritage, proud of their Christian background, and I found this is a very Christian community--very respectful. I believe if I follow the role, I have a place in this community. And I feel touched by that.

LW: I would imagine that when you first came to Holland, you had some very good experiences as you just related. Did you have negative experiences--things whether they were discrimination in housing or anything like that? Did you encounter those types of things?

JR: I never in my life experienced being rejected because I was Hispanic. I felt like people were nice to me; my co-workers in my agency, most of them were Dutch, my supervisor was Dutch--I felt welcome. The only difficulty was the language at that time. If people don't understand you and they couldn't communicate with you, sometimes I felt that people were friendly with a desire to meet me, but sometime maybe the language could be a barrier. But if you as a person feel proud of being Hispanic, and I'm very secure of myself, I never saw any discrimination because I never in my life have been discriminated in person. I feel once I learned the language people will accept me. I was respectful to other people; people were respectful to me. I never had any problem with that.

LW: You made language a high priority?

JR: Yes, language--English--is a the most difficult language to learn. It is not so easy. I believe myself, as a professional that came here, I have some knowledge because you
take English from first grade in Puerto Rico until you graduate. I believe, and sometimes it's difficult, if somebody asks me, my question is, how difficult is it for people who come to this community like we have from other groups, that their education level is sixth grade or fourth grade, and never have been exposed to the English language. Some of those people overcome that crisis, and deal with that very well. Not everybody does so fast, like I did, but maybe a little longer.

LW: What type of substance, speaking of your specialty that you worked in when you came, what types of things did you observe in the community in that area? What kinds of problems were there in Holland in 1984 when you came?

JR: In 1984, the first problem that I found was there was nothing in the Hispanic language. There was a lot of good information, good agency providing excellent services to the main community, but there was nothing culturally sensitive for the Hispanics at that time. We started developing a network— I brought a lot of information translated to Spanish from Puerto Rico—and we developed our own educational material. We translated a lot of information. We started developing a lot of support groups for Hispanics. There were no AA meetings for Hispanics, Alcoholics Anonymous, and we took the leading of developing the first Hispanic AA meeting in it is still running. All the problems that I found as a professional was there wasn't any agency that was agency to provide culturally sensitive services in the state of Michigan, residential program in the state. The first client that was referred to me was a very alcoholic case, Hispanic in town, a very popular person (I don't want to mention the name), but in that case, Judge Galien called me and said if you help this
person to rehabilitate, you are going to graduate. I remember that the only residential program was in Chicago, and I took that man personally to Chicago. I said we couldn't do that anymore. We decided to write the first grant for the state of Michigan through Child and Family Services in coordination with other state networks. We were advocating, networking, and developed the first grant for the residential treatment program in Michigan. I moved three years from Holland to develop the residential program Project Rehab. Grand Rapids for the first program. They had to serve maybe 28 days for Hispanic residential program. The program started with six beds; yesterday I heard that the residential program for Hispanics since 1987 today, they grow and they have thirty beds; and always are busy. That means thanks to our leadership in Holland, we developed the first Hispanic residential program. Holland has been distinguished through the Hispanic program because we had been developing a lot of different programs that we have been using as an example for other parts of the state of Michigan or nationally. We have been receiving a lot of national awards. One of the programs that you are familiar with is CASA that is already placed in Hope College, and is one of the programs of Hope College. We started that program in coordination with Child and Family Services at the beginning. We developed another program in prevention in Grand Rapids, "Yo Puedo" for leadership program for others in Grand Rapids, and that program has been since 1988, is one of the best programs in prevention and won a national award also. Our programs are very dynamic programs.

LW: And you're still with Child and Family Services today, correct?
JR: Yes, I supervise the Hispanic program, from that day the program was started having only one person and another came aboard. Today we have three full-time clinicians, we have one prevention specialist, and we have a secretary also.

LW: Have the issues changed for people who come to you for services from when you first came fifteen years ago? And how have they changed?

JR: In the beginning, there was a lot of referral from the court for alcohol driving offenses in the area. Today, maybe in the last five years, I see a lot of youth coming to our program due to gang involvement and violence behavior in town. That is one issue that recently we are going to be addressing. The last two years we developed the first domestic violence Hispanic program in the area for domestic violence cases or assault cases. We provide a good program, the domestic violence using the Duluth Program.

LW: Tell me a little bit about that program.

JR: This is a program to help men who batter their wives—how to be accountable for their behavior. The intention of this program is to provide safety for the victims. In order to provide safety for the victims, we need to provide some training to the offenders in order to teach them how to control their behavior, how to identify their anger, how to take time out, how to be responsible, how to be respectful to their partner, and maybe to help them to decrease their use of emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. That is our intention.

LW: Your goal is to try to keep people together when possible?

JR: And sometimes the goal is if the person decides to return back to the family, that he learns some skill. Sometimes we are not so fortunate to make them to come back
because the victim doesn't want the person back. But the person maybe will make the
decision—even going in another relationship—I would not do the same behavior. This
is a very successful program. All the people in town running the program for the
white people, for the majority of English speaking clients, but already we started this
program three years ago, very successful. We are having a good outcome of that.

LW: In the school systems they talk a lot about mainstreaming. I spoke with Aden Ramirez
over at Waukazoo just a couple weeks ago. You're sort of talking about parallel
services between the English speaking majority population and the Hispanic minority
population. Do you see a point where those two will merge? Or do you think there
will always be separate programs?

JR: It is a good issue because the problem of this in our agency, we say this is a Hispanic
program because the only one reason is the language. The only reason that maybe the
Hispanic doesn't help us is to the excellent program that Holland has is because
they're not bilingual. What I see my agency that we have Hispanic English speaking
second and third generation Hispanic, who prefer all the program with any white
people. In our agency what we are doing is people who don't speak English, that is
what the Hispanic program needs to work with. Because we are talking about
populations who are moving here from other country, maybe it could take 10 or 20 or
30 years or maybe never to learn English. They go to a Spanish church, they
socialize with Hispanic people, and they continue keeping in those kind of limitation.
But if you see all the people born second generation Hispanic or third generation
Hispanic, they are English speaking mostly. Those clients, the program the Child and
Family Services have been developing for the community at large. They share with that; we are pulling together, cooperation as a group. The domestic violence that we are running at Child and Family Services, we have an English speaking group, we have Chinese and we have Hispanic that is English speaking.

LW: So really what's driving the separateness is simply the language issue?

JR: Yes, it is the language.

LW: What do you think the issues are for new immigrants who are coming, or Spanish-speaking, when they come into Holland? You talked a little bit about what you saw when you first came, what do you think are the issues for new immigrants in 1997?

JR: I believe the new issues of the Hispanic when they come to Holland that they are going to be facing is first, the language; second, low-income housing. All the issues that I see, they have asked us to education, to communicate education. They want to improve the language. Maybe now with the limited resource that has been cut, those services, I feel very sorry for that. Maybe they are going to have another limitation is to have immediately ask us to communication. Maybe all the problem the Hispanic are going to be facing more skills, job. The first Hispanic to come here, is better opportunity for those Hispanic who have some skills, some education. Like if you are a doctor, a lawyer, a social worker, a teacher--more professional Hispanic are having better opportunity. Hispanic who come here with low education, the only work that I see for them is fast-food work, restaurant, migrant workers, agriculture work, and that doesn't require a lot of skill. That is what I see here, the two opposition. When you see a lot of people coming with low skill, you are going to see more problems also.
When you see more professional Hispanic skill, you are going to see a different background and a different way of living and condition.

LW: What would you say are the proportions of those two? Would you say 25% are professional, 75% are not? Do you have any sense for those who are migrating here?

JR: I believe now the numbers of professionals is increasing. I believe I see like 10% are professional, and maybe 90% are unskilled people.

LW: You mentioned housing just a few moments ago. How do you feel the community is doing relative to the housing issue, and you mentioned low-income housing. I know there has been a number of issues in the community that have been discussed publicly. What are your feelings on those things?

JR: I believe the community has a standard. And I believe that any community in any country they have a standard depending on your income. The community has the right to express themselves in the way that they feel, but I believe that the government and the community of Holland is growing, and we need to take some action and some responsibility on how we're going to provide equal housing for everybody. That means that certain areas maybe we know that you're are Hispanic or a doctor or you can have houses where professionals live. The other way, people with low income but they have houses where their income. Any community that wants to define a professional, that happened in Puerto Rico when I was living there, if you were a middle class and some low income person was coming, you were suspecting that that person complete the requirement of your neighborhood. Be clean, be organized. I believe in Holland, I see the same characteristic of my home town too. I think that is
nothing against people. If you get some good education and you live as a professional, you want the people who live next to you to have their yard clean, and have the standard of living of that community. I believe that there needs to be some education process. People who come here to Holland, like myself, I never have any training about Dutch heritage, about Dutch community, the values; and I believe that we should be having, through community education, some programs that teach new generations of people coming to town to understand the way of living here, the expectation, the religion values, and maybe people could understand better and maybe have more respect. One example is that I found, is that something that is respectful for me, to be respectful for white people, but it is because the value system is completely different and I'm going to give you some example. If I invite you to come here and you come with your family, it is acceptable. You can come with two or three persons and I don't saying anything. But if you invite me to your house, it is me. If I am going to be taking other people, I need to let you know. That happened here that one of my co-workers was invited by one of her peers to her home, and she came with two children. She said, "Oh, I was not expecting you with your two daughters." And she was hurt. But that is the way of living here. Now that I am living with a roommate who is an Anglo, I have been learning a lot about American ways and that helped me understand better the values and the culture. But I believe that the community needs to have some training, not for us to come here and say I'm going to train you how to understand my culture, but it is good for me to know how the people here live, what is their values and tradition. That could be very nice. It
could turn out well from both sides.

LW: How do you think we could engender more cultural sensitivity in the community? I get a sense from what you're saying that these communities live in the same place, but there tends to be very little communication. What do you think we could do?

JR: I believe the church in Holland plays a very important part in leadership. It is one of the most important organization and the school. If both organizations are aware, in order for me to train or give information about my culture, need to be aware that it needs to be given in the language that the people could understand. That means that I could be giving a workshop to Hispanics, if I do it in English, they would not understand. The language is a barrier. Having people from those organizations could be culturally sensitive to their values and maybe speak the language, to provide the training and having maybe some sharing with different churches, inviting each other.

I see sometimes independent Hispanic churches, and I see the need to be having more inter-network involved. I believe that church could provide that kind of support.

LW: Do you think they are doing that at all?

JR: There is some effort, and I don't believe have been too successful. This is a long-term project. I want to learn more about the American way, about the Dutch heritage, about their values. Maybe a directory of professional resources available to these organizations. I don't see that as bad faith; sometimes it is because we don't know the people who are there. Maybe something needs to be done in developing a directory, who are the people that we need to address, who are the people that we need to advocate. Sometimes I work with a group of Hispanic people that using our agency
could be a good bridge for any organization to develop some kind of training like this. I could advocate, I could network with those organizations as well.

LW: Is the church significant in your personal life? If so, what role has it played for you personally?

JR: As a child I was raised as a Catholic. My mom donated one of the homes as a church in my hometown. That means that I was raised in a very Catholic home, I was helping the priest as alterboy. I played that role all of my childhood, going to different towns, giving services. After becoming an adult, I became involved in the inter-denominational church. I believe that was good for me to learn about other churches. When I moved to Holland, I was involved with Hispanic organization churches in the area, and I was involved with the Catholic church and I continue to be involved with the Catholic church. But I very often visit other churches in the denomination. I know right now that I belong to only one denomination. I believe that I am very open to any denomination.

LW: I assume that Catholic is the majority of churches in Puerto Rico?

JR: Oh yes, the great majority. And it's changing; now you see a lot of different protestant and evangelical churches coming into town.

LW: When we talk about the Hispanic community--and this has come up with other people that I've talked with--there is, as I understand it, more of an established Hispanic community in Holland who have been here for some time. Then there is the migrant Hispanic community which comes and goes. Could you tell me, from your point of view, what the special needs are of the migrant community, who come and then they
go, and you, of course, have to deal with difficulties that come up because of your role. Could you tell me what their special needs are?

JR: This is my personal perception. When I still a resident in Holland who has been here for the last twenty-five years, most of them have a history and background of being a migrant. We are talking about maybe a migrant population who came here as a migrant, decided to stay here, their children had opportunity to get an education and become professional—that means that a lot of the migrant population who are coming here today from Texas or from Mexico, I used to believe that those people enjoy travelling. They come here because they have a need to find jobs. But culturally they feel that their family and their support system is in Texas. Those people decide to go back to Texas because they are homesick, they have their houses there, they come here to work. We have doing this for the last ten years, is try to sit down because their children have been affected in the school, and I believe one of the issues that is most concern to me, to the migrant population, is how does moving from one place to another is affecting the children to feel, belong to someplace, to feel committed to that place, to have a good education consistently, and a very structured education. I believe that there is a gap that is missing. I believe that most of the people that have been affected are the children, in that kind of issue. There are other issues with the migrant population that I see, that now with more opportunity or jobs in the area, I see more migrants decide to stay in the area. Years ago, there was not too much opportunity for them to find a job in the area, but because Holland and Ottawa is growing, there is a good market for job opportunity. They are moving from the
migrant position to factory work. That means if I am making more money here, why
do I need to go to Texas? That is what I see here, more of the migrant population
with the opportunity. If you are Hispanic and you come here and you are doing well,
the Hispanic family is committed to helping their family and immediately they say to
his brother, there's a good job opportunity here, come. They take over and help their
family come here to Michigan. I see a lot of family migrants who stay here, continue
supporting their family, and their family continues growing. I know that they do
because they need more support from their family. They feel lonely. If I have my
family here, I don't feel so lonely. I feel that I have more support. The Hispanics
have a tendency to be family-oriented, and help not only his immediate family, but
their extended family. We're talking cousin, the godmother, godfather, and all those
people also.

LW: You've seen, I'm sure, in Holland—since you've been here since 1984—a growing
cultural diversity. Not simply Hispanic and caucasian. Tell me your thoughts on that
growth. What have you observed, and what impact has it had?

JR: I think it is good for Holland having diversity. Coming from hometown 47 years ago,
when I was born, and today, I see a lot of changes. Diversity helped community to
grow, and sometimes you need a diverse or label people to do job, but that doesn't
mean to do that job. What I see here in Holland, I came here Mexican, the largest
minority group, and I see a lot of Hispanic groups, ethnic groups, and diversity
among Hispanic. We have in Holland, Mexican is the largest, maybe second Puerto
Rican, third maybe people from South America. We have Vietnamese, people from
Laos, and I see a lot of people from Brazil coming here--Latin American--and I see a lot of other ethnic groups from India. That is good for the community because we are learning more about diversity. But diversity creates a lot of problems also. Sometimes people who are very traditional, they are not so open for those changes. Sometimes happens in any cultures, not Holland only. I see now that the community is growing. They are so resistant for older people to accept those changes, but I believe that we could have a start. Cultural changes, when we're talking about society, we couldn't change society changes. I believe the United States is changing, not just in Michigan, but I see the Hispanic communities through all the United States, if we are looking at the census number in 1990, in this census, from the last census, I believe the Hispanic community has grown from 14 million people to 24 million. That means it is growing. Up here, the Hispanic for the 2015 are going to be maybe one of the largest minority groups in the United States, overpassing the black community. It's a lot of changes just waiting ahead that we couldn't list off. That is the time that people need to sit down and learn how to live with other ethnic groups and with other people around your neighborhood. Like myself, I'm the only Hispanic in this neighborhood.

LW: How does that work for you? Do you have any difficulties because of that, or has it been very positive?

JR: Very positive because I am professional, and I understand all the people here. When we bought the house, the people were disappointed how bad the yard looked. When we came here, we started doing like all the neighbors did, taking care of the yard.
Then they came giving compliments on how nice, how wonderful. We have an invitation to people's houses here, we're welcome, people are coming here. An excellent relationship. Because if you understand that up here, you don't have any problem.

LW: I should ask...are you married?

JR: No, I'm not married; I'm single, and happy with that (laughs).

LW: Do you have children at all?

JR: No, I don't have any.

LW: We were talking about the Hispanic community and the diversity within that community. How is the interaction—you mentioned the Mexican, Puerto Rican, and South American as sort of elements—how do they inter-relate? Do they inter-relate well? Are there difficulties there? Do you see that difficulty in the LAUP, or is that not even an issue?

JR: It could be an issue for some people. For myself, I don't see that as an issue for me because I have a lot of respect for my people. I know that I'm Puerto Rican and they're Mexican, and I have a lot of respect for my peers and the people that I serve. If you are committed to your people that you provide services, I believe you won't have any problem with that. In terms of leadership, yes, sometimes you have some problem with leadership in any group. It doesn't need to be because you are Puerto Rican or you're Mexican. If you are Puerto Rican only, sometimes you have resentment for leadership. Sometimes people feel that they have some differences. Maybe I don't agree with some of those people, I don't need to agree with that, but I
respect their point of view. I'm willing to listen, and I'm willing to share with them my perception.

LW: Tell me a little bit about the role of women in the Hispanic community. First tell me what that role is, if you would, and then tell me if it's changed in the fifteen years that you've been here.

JR: I have a lot of respect for women in terms of...I come from a country in Puerto Rico where maybe in the traditional way men were the boss and responsible. As Puerto Rico became more industrialized (end of side one) In Holland, what I'm observing is that the women coming from very traditional Mexican people, people who come from other countries, first generation, maybe the role of the female is very determined. Men over women, boys over girls, grandpa over grandma...it's a generational gender. That is part of the tradition of the roles that play family members in the Hispanic structure. But what I see in Holland now, the women who are second and third generation, they are playing a different role now. It's changing. I see the women assuming leadership in the house, being a household for the whole family, being a more administrator, some of them are good administrators, and I believe that the female role has changed. Sometimes there is some differences between the traditional value versus the new contemporary value system. Sometimes maybe that can be some of the problem that we have that is affecting some issue of domestic violence and some other issues as a consequence, understanding the two generations of Hispanics. Most of the Hispanic community that lives in Holland is still the man being the chief, the boss of that home—at the center of the family is the man. If you are a white
person and you go into the Hispanic family, go directly to the man, don't go to the female. Or don't go first to the children. Always the man is the person and chief of that home, and that means part of the respect for Hispanic is go first to the man. If the male couldn't understand you, he will appoint the person that he trusts, that he could use, in that family. Sometimes we go as white people to the house of them and start talking with the child who speaks English. If you are going to be looking into ____________, "I'm looking for your father." If your father says he can't understand, he will say, "Maria, come here, I want you to translate." It's still very traditional, the Hispanic community here, in values and tradition.

LW: Earlier in our conversation, you mentioned gangs as an issue. Could you tell me a little bit about what you've seen as far as gangs, and where are we at right now?

JR: I share this information because I want to qualify my persuasion. Recently I heard a workshop, an activity in town, talking about finding out that the female Hispanic was not treated equally as the remaining community. Personally, I don't agree with that point. I feel that the organization in Holland, talking about the core system probation department, they're working very closely with the Hispanic program, especially with my agency; we have been addressing issue. What I see some of the problem of gangs activity in town when I work with those cases, that sometimes I need to do some intervention. I found out in the history of those families are that they are divorced, there is substance abuse involved, there is a lot of dysfunction in that family. The child responds in the way that the family has been raised. If you come from a dysfunctional family, if you come from a father who abused alcohol and drugs, from
the divorced parents, mom just working, one or two times, lack of supervision of those kids. Those kids, the statistics show, that they are going to face more difficulty. What I see happening in most of the gang's activity, is that the children have not been supervised one hundred percent by their parents. There is some dysfunction in that family that shows that there is some problem there. I couldn't say that that is one hundred percent, but a large number of them. It's easy for me to blame organizational agencies, but I believe we should be blaming ourselves, what we can do as parents--what is my responsibility as a good father to provide care to those children? Sometimes I see parents here working two or three jobs in order to afford a decent income to support their family. I don't say that unjustified, but sometimes the consequences of that is the ________________ for the family. That is what I see.

LW: Just sort of guessing, how many kids would you say are involved in gang activity?

JR: Most of the kids that come to our agency because they have some dysfunction. Lately we have been seeing more youth coming to our program. I could tell you this year I believe my program saw 25 adolescents, maybe 15 of them in gang involvement. When I say gangs, is that by definitions they have good friends that relate to them, and they find maybe acting out, they start experimenting with drugs and alcohol. They shell out the money, why not use, among those groups. Stealing, breaking in, I see a lot of cases.

LW: What are the major substances being abused in Holland?

JR: Among the Hispanic, first is alcohol among adult people, marijuana, maybe some acids among the younger generation. Now I see a few cases of cocaine, but a lot of
marijuana. We’re lucky compared to other communities in that I see...for example, I was attending a visit to one of the Hispanic programs in Detroit and all of the cases there are HIV, AIDS, heroin, crack, ice—all the very hard drugs. Compared with Holland, it is still under control. But I see now a lot of other people coming from the big city, and I believe for the next five years that we are going to see more difficult cases coming into this area.

LW: More hard drug issues?

JR: Oh, yes.

LW: I assume you’ve seen some.

JR: Yes, very little, but I see that could be increased very soon. That is my perception.

LW: Do you think there is more drug trafficking coming because of the growth?

JR: Yes, I believe it. I see a lot of trafficking, and I am concerned about that too. People who are connected with families and extended family, and contacts are coming from New York, Miami, Puerto Rican connection, Cuban connection, Mexican connection, Chicano connection. I’m working with that population, but that doesn’t mean that that happens only in the Hispanic community, because the same happens with the African-American community and any other groups. Now the Russian community is growing in this area. Very soon we are going to have the mafia connection with Russia, because that is happening in California. It’s changing, and we need to be open for those changes and not be closed to those changes. The best way to cope with that is not being in denial, accepting that we have a problem, and work with those problems. In the beginning when I arrived here in Holland, there was a lot of denial in
addressing the school system that we have a problem. Now I see that they will admit that they have a problem and use a community agency to assist them in that process.

LW: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland, and what effect have they had on the community? They don't necessarily have to be Hispanic related, what have you witnessed that sort of stands out in your mind in the fifteen years that you've been here?

JR: Maybe a big controversy that I saw in Holland...I don't know if Holland was prepared to deal with a lot of problems that come with ethnicity. Like a need for bilingual resources, language differences, way of living, the way that people manage their home in town. I believe one of the big issues that I heard from a lot of people from Holland is people who come to Holland, and I know that minorities have the tendency to afford houses in new and good condition because that is what they could afford. Maybe how to assist those people, because if people they reject in the way that sometimes minority groups keep their houses, their neighborhood, the way of cutting their grass, and keeping the beauty of the city; and I believe painting their house, taking care of their houses; and I believe that a lot of programming to come maybe to assist those people, and maybe a committee could help with funding. In Holland they have a good agency that provides services to help people to buy low paint and rent equipment. I believe a project like this should be maybe reinforced. I believe the city of Holland had a grant for rehabilitation of home. A program like that should be reinforced in town to assist the people and teach the people what are the expectations of the community. Because sometime people don't know about that. When people
come from other countries, I don't say only Hispanic, and maybe living in these conditions was the only way that they were living. Coming here with a house with a floor, is a palace for them. I like to see houses clean. I enjoy to take my family and friends when they come to visit me how beautiful is Holland and to show how nice the landscaping is here. I feel proud of that. I believe that some person doesn't care about the yard next to me, I'm not going to feel happy. I don't care if he is white, black or whatever.

LW: Do you think there is a perceivable generation gap in Holland between elders and children?

JR: Yes, among minorities there is a big gap. The gap is the need to be with the cultural differences, also maybe the parents are very traditional, raising the children in a different country with different values, learning other language. Sometimes I find in Hispanic families that the parents couldn't speak with their children because their children are ashamed to speak Hispanic language. They feel ashamed because they don't want people to fail because they're Hispanic. Sometimes children have a tendency to learn the English language very fast. Between brothers and siblings they use the language, but they don't want to talk to Dad and Mom. They don't feel comfortable going out with Dad and Mom. I don't want Dad and Mom to go to the school because he has long hair, he has cowboy boots, and that makes him look Hispanic--and I feel ashamed of that. It's a lot of issue that the Hispanic children go through that we need to do a lot more with those families. That could change in the longterm, but now it is a big issue between Hispanics. Sometimes they say "I don't
have the power to discipline my children because if I spank my children, there is an agency that is going to come and say I'm abusing and neglecting my children." There are sometimes a lot of traditional ways of discipline, and they don't know how the system works here, and how you need to discipline your children here. A lot of parenting education needs to be done. We are doing it through our agency.

LW: So the assimilation of the children is happening at a faster rate than the parents who are immigrating and that's causing difficulty?

JR: Yes. That happened in New York with Puerto Rican, it happened in Florida with the Cuban--a lot of difficulty. I see a lot of conflict, a gap, between the younger and older generation.

LW: Is there someone here in Holland or someone from where you lived in Puerto Rico who played sort of an important role in your life--like a role model or someone who you respected a great deal and had a lot of influence on you?

JR: My friends play a very important role for me. My father, my mom. We very family oriented. A lot of teachers were good role models for me, a lot of professionals when I finished my masters degree--a lot of good mentors that are still alive. A lot of professional people were good mentors to me. The church has been a good mentor for me. When I moved here, I believe that I had a lot of good mentors from the Hispanic community also, peers, from the Dutch community, some of my supervisors here have been good mentors for me. Everyday I find that we have a new mentor because I'm open to learn something good every day. My clients say sometimes that I learn something good from them, but I don't learn the bad things (laughs).
LW: Bilingual education has been under some fire. Tell me your views on that—the education and also the difficulties they seem to be experiencing.

JR: I believe in bilingual education, and I don’t believe only bilingual—I think we could be more than bilingual, trilingual. The Caribbean, for example, is a Dutch heritage. Most of the people there are African-American. You go there and they speak Spanish, Dutch, English, and I don’t know how many languages. Because education was reinforced from first grade. There are a lot of studies that you can teach younger people. More language and they could become very effective. I believe that bilingual education taught people to go from the process, is a transition process that needs to happen. Because the Hispanic community is so closed and so tight with the family value system, the bilingual education becomes very late in life in that process of culteration because grandmother and uncle are leaving a home and they speak only Spanish at home. If you provide bilingual education, I believe the family has the opportunity for the children to go and see that is important to languages. That it is okay to be Hispanic, that you can speak the language, but you are living here and you need to learn English. But don’t give up the Spanish language. Sometimes those children need to go to Mexico, they need to go to other countries. My example in my program is, I have been looking for a professional bilingual person and I received few resumes. Some of the resumes were Mexican-American. Some of them we could not hire because they could not speak the Spanish language. The job opportunities are better for bilingual people. Now that the United States is expanding the business and now that Latino America is going to become one of the new markets. That means
those bilingual people we have are going to be very good people to serve the demand for having more bilingual people in those businesses or corporations. I see a lot of good opportunity for people who are bilingual more than for people who are only one oriented language. When I was living in Puerto Rico, I didn't care about the English language. I'm here, people come here and they need to speak the Spanish and that was wrong. Now I move here, I know how important it is for me now that I could speak two languages. Before I was going to different country, and I was very limited. Now, in most of the country they speak English, but if I'm going to South America, I'm going to speak Spanish; I go to Spain in Spanish; I could go to the Caribbean and speak Spanish; I could go to the Phillipines or some islands and they speak it. There is more opportunity for people who are bilingual. That is a second language, most of the speaking America is the Spanish language.

LW: Where did you live when you lived in Holland?

JR: When I came to Holland, I rented an apartment because I was in the Centennial Building. I believe that was when they were remodeling and it was a beautiful building. I was living facing the second floor, facing the Holland Museum, it was the Post Office then. I was very comfortable because I was in the front of the park. Beautiful view. I lived in Holland for one year until I decided what I was planning to do. When I came from Puerto Rico, I came with a license with the government for three years to decide if I wanted to go back to Puerto Rico--I could go back to my old job. I decided to stay. I rented an apartment in Zeeland for another year, and I bought my first house two years after that.
LW: Where was your first house?

JR: It was in 140th, West Ottawa school, the house behind, next to West Ottawa Schools. On the north side. If you go in Quincy house, my house was the one in the front, on the corner, tall brown house. I was happy in that house. A very nice house.

LW: How long did you live there?

JR: For four years and then I moved here.

LW: Why did you move here from there?

JR: First because my roommate was working with Ottawa County, and I was working in Holland. We decided it would be better to find someplace for you and for me to be the best place. Anyway, I like more the north side. I enjoy being close to the lake because I was raised by the ocean in Puerto Rico. Someday my dream is to be living close to the lake.

LW: You're pretty close here—right across from...

JR: Water to me is very important. We have been living here five years already.

LW: It's a lovely home.

JR: Thank you.

LW: Coming to the end, there are some questions that we are asking everyone to try to be able to compare different answers. Holland was recognized recently as one of ten All-American cities—I'm sure you're probably aware of that. From your point of view, what qualities do you think earned Holland that honor?

JR: I love Holland, I don't know why. I came here, I couldn't change living out of West Michigan. I don't like Lansing, I don't like Detroit, Grand Rapids sometimes I like,
sometimes I don't--but this is a wonderful place. I found it's a family-oriented community, a very Christian community, people here are very honest, very trustful people. And that is the strengths of Holland, I believe is the people. They are respectful; if you follow the rules, you are welcome. But don't do something to hurt or to harm the community, because people are going to get upset. That is something that is acceptable for me. I see Holland very in the way I was raised, the concept of family neighborhood. I see through the church a lot of good relationships between the people who are fellows from other churches, they support. They want to be very helpful to other people. Very generous people. I'm very happy to be here. I feel very safe here.

LW: What role does Hope College play in the community, positive or negative, from your point of view?

JR: My first experience when I came here with Hope College was very positive. In 1994, Hope College was running an international group for a lot of people coming from South America. They were having a good representation of Hispanic, there was Puerto Rican, there were people from Chile, Peru; there were people from Japan, Africa. There was a lot of diversity in college. I was involved as a professional in the beginning in some of those international activities. I remember that they were doing activities with ethnic groups, food--a very active group. My impression of Hope College is that it has been very open to the community of Holland, to the organization. They support us with running CASA for minority children. There are not too many universities that do that, but they have been doing that. In the past, our
program they have been working on very closely with the Upward Bound program with minority children, and they use the facility. I have a lot of respect for Hope College and their contribution to the community. First, they are always having minority representation in college, something they have been increasing. I believe they could increase a little more. Everything is open for improvement. I receive a lot of invitations for activities at Hope College. I have been in the Christmas activities at Hope College, I have been invited for presentations for music activities. We have been attending training there. One time, Hope College contacted me to help them choose, in the Spanish department, to interview English speaking student who was bilingual to go to work in the Red Cross with disaster in the Caribbean. I helped them interview students. I don't know the capacity of minorities at Hope College. I know that Hope College is a very expensive college, but I believe that in the past they've had grants and scholarships for people who have less income to get involved. I heard something from a Hispanic who went to Hope College, that it was difficult for them to stay there. The competition for them was very hard. I don't know the reason for that, but I knew another Hispanic who finished successfully there. And they are doing very well--good professional people already. Out of the state and doing very well.

LW: Recently there was an issue--I'm sure you read it in the paper and maybe you were involved in the conversations about it--regarding the flag issue of the mayor of Holland, of lowering the flag after someone was murdered in the community, and was caucasian; and concerns that that was done for this individual, but not for members of
the minority community when it occurred in their community. What were your thoughts and reactions to that issue?

JR: I believe that he responded emotionally as a person, like the mayor maybe could be Puerto Rican or Mexican. If we change that, maybe we will do the same. I believe what happened is that this is a very calm community. For me, coming from Puerto Rico, ten deaths in a day is a good rate. But Holland, one death, and the way it happened, I have some concerns too as a member of the community. Not just for the safety of the white people, but for the safety of any person who lives in Holland. Sometimes those children are out of control. We see that most of the crime in the United States has been done by youth, any youth. We're not talking about Hispanic. All the statistics, youths are getting more into crime. That is a very dangerous population, because they don't have the boundaries and how to set the limits. I'm afraid. If this issue hasn't been addressed. I believe Holland has been very well addressed with the police department, with organizations addressing the issue of youth. We have the Boys and Girls Club, Christian organizations, a lot of things have been done. The intensive supervision program for the court system trying to make those people more comfortable to go to treatment, to be more consistent in receiving services. We need to be aggressive with them, in order to reduce. In that kind of incidence, I know the family. And that is one example that I gave to you. Dysfunctional families produce dysfunctional people.

LW: What are your feelings on the new area center that they are talking about?

JR: Oh, I want it. I think that we need...myself as a professional, sometimes I feel that as
a gap in my life, a good cultural event—having the philharmonic, having good art coming into town, not to Grand Rapids. To me, in winter going to Grand Rapids could be a nightmare. My recommendation for this...I don't believe Holland is a good place for that. You need to find a place where everybody has access. If they continue having the problem they have, a lot of people don't want to go to Holland...If I work in Holland as a professional, sometimes I want to do social activities like this not in my same community, but I want somewhere in between. I believe between Holland and Grand Haven could be a good place to find. People from all this area have access to that. I think that could be very helpful. We need that. If we need to pay with taxes, I will support that.

LW: What are your thoughts on the redevelopment of Windmill Island?

JR: Excellent, I would support that. I believe that is a good impact for the Island, and is going to help them have more income to maintain the island. I believe it is very expensive. Maybe for people not to just go there, but be living there. If you live there, you bring family, you bring more people and guests to your place. And that is a beautiful place that we should continue developing. I believe that is a great idea to continue developing that area. It's a good project.

LW: Is there anything else that we should talk about?

JR: No, those were good questions.

LW: I think we covered a lot today. So, thank you very much for your time with me today.

JR: Thank you.