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Villagran, Lydia Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Lydia Villagran

(unedited)

Conducted October 28, 1997
by Geoffrey Reynolds

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
GR: Could you please state your name and date of birth?
LV: Lydia Villagran, [date removed], 1944.

GR: Where were you born, Lydia?
LV: In Raymondville, Texas.

GR: When did you first come to Holland?

GR: And why did you move to Holland?
LV: I came here to visit my mother who had remarried and she was living here with my stepfather. So then when I came to visit I fell in love with the area, and I saw the possibilities in the area. So I decided that I would convince my husband when he came to take me back home to try to stay here! Which is what I did. He came to take my oldest daughter and me back home about six weeks later. I did some fast talking in two weeks and convinced him to stay here (laughs). And have loved the place since.

GR: Do you have children still living in Holland?
LV: I have three children, two of them live here. One just married and moved to Grand Rapids. The three children are Lillian, she’s the oldest, and she is a Michigan State graduate and with a double major in criminal justice and social work. And my middle one completed her course work at Grand Valley and she’s a president of Key
Personnel. And then the baby is the one who just married and moved to Grand
Rapids is Linda, she’s a Kendall graduate and works for a subsidiary of McGraw-Hill
in Grand Rapids on the cad - works on the computer all day long. So those are my
three.

GR: Can you describe your first impressions of Holland?

LV: My first impression of Holland was that there was so much industry. Where we were
born and raised, my husband and I, there is no industry. Therefore I was so
impressed with the amount of factories. I had never worked. I has always been a
housewife. I had not worked out of the home. So I thought the possibilities of my
husband staying and I going to work to help better our lot in life and our children’s
too. So therefore that was what impressed me first of all. And then, secondly, the
land. So much land. So many trees! The water! All that. Where we’re from, we
have to go 150 miles to see the largest body of water which is the Gulf of Mexico.
So all that impressed me. But the area we’re from, there’s cactus and we don’t have
four seasons like here. So all that was just so overwhelming. The beauty of it all.

GR: What are some organizations or activities you are involved in today?

LV: Right now I’m basically involved with the education association. That’s basically
where I spend the majority of my time. The second other organization is a loosely
knit group called the Hispanic Professionals and Friends Group. We meet every two
or three months. I just sent out letters telling them where we are meeting and who’s
going to be the keynote speaker or whom we’re going to recognize for whatever
they’ve done in the area. And so that’s basically it as far as working with any groups
are concerned.

GR: And how long has that group been around?

LV: The Hispanic Professionals - I think close to ten years. And as I told you, it’s really loosely knit, and then we meet, actually, around the school year and so we don’t meet during the summer and then we start up again in the fall.

GR: How many members do you have?

LV: About twenty-five faithful attendees. And then another fifteen or twenty who attend on or off, depending on what the program is.

GR: And where do you typically meet?

LV: We take turns meeting in churches between St. Francis and the Seminary, where Andy Fierro’s church meets, and so we take turns meeting there. Once in a while we meet in a restaurant if it’s just a small turnout. But that’s basically where we meet.

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

LV: The most significant changes I’ve noticed is...well, one of them is that more minorities are visible in professions. Still not quite to the degree that I feel they should be. But we’ve come a long way. And that is very rewarding for me to see because then our children in the schools see that they can aspire to be something other than just working in the fields. Which, you know, we wouldn’t be anywhere if it wasn’t for those people who were working in the fields - but we’d like them to think of other avenues to earn a living, really. And so that’s been one of the ones. Another one has been to see so many of my people earning more money to enable
them to get better housing, get better life for themselves and their children too, which in turn is allowing them to go into higher ed. Which is where we would like all the children to go. And so those changes...In the political arena, it has been really nice to see one of our younger people come up through the ranks and go to school and become a councilman and commissioner. That has been really nice to have someone at City Hall working. So all of that has been very nicely improved over the years.

GR: What are some of the reasons why those changes occurred, in your opinion?

LV: I think because parents saw, as I, the opportunity for the children, and because of more and more parents, both parents, going out and working enabled them to be better off economically. And along with the better social-economic improvement, then you see that your children then can go on to school and get degrees. Because I think all parents want their children to have a better life than they did. And so then along with that comes of course going on to higher ed.

GR: How have you been involved in some of these changes?

LV: When I worked for Holland Public Schools as a teacher’s aide, the Holland Public Schools was approached by Dr. Martinez, who was in charge of the bilingual program at Grand Valley, and gave us eight slots for teachers’ aides from Holland Public Schools to start going to college. So at that particular point there was a big fallout. We lost bilingual funds and everything in Holland because records were not being kept as they should have and the tracking that was ordered...testing and all that we needed to do for the federal funds either were not done appropriately, or if they were done, were not recorded appropriately. Anyway, Washington pulled out the
funds. So we lost the funds for the bilingual program. At that point, I talked to the superintendent and the assistant superintendent and told them about the slots that we were going to lose from Grand Valley if we didn’t act on them. Because the administration saw that the monies were gone for the program, then they encouraged me to do what I could from my point of view. So I spent many a night on the phone trying to talk to all the teachers’ aides to try to recruit some of them to go to the college. I had a heck of a time convincing because all of the teachers’ aides were mothers who worked as teachers aides because it worked in with their schedule. I had a heck of a time filling those eight slots. At the end I still had two left. So that’s where I started going to college. The bilingual program from Grand Valley paid for our first twenty or twenty-three credits and so that earned us a bilingual endorsement as a teacher’s aide. Once you were that far along what they hoped would happen is that you would continue going on and get your degree! Which is what I did. And so did a few of the other people I recruited.

GR: How have these changes affected you?

LV: I always wanted to go to college. I always did. And it was a matter of waiting until my kids were older so I could get my degree and go to school. I just got an earlier start with this. Because of that it enabled my husband and me then to better be prepared for when our own were ready to go to college. Since then, of course, encourage all the children as they come through my class to go on to higher ed.

GR: Holland has been recognized as one of ten All-America cities. What qualities do you think earned Holland this honor?
LV: Well, first of all, the location. That is one that attracts people all over and the aesthetics. You know, it’s just beautiful as I shared with you in the opening. Secondly, having the job opportunities that are available here. Thirdly, with all the churches and the Christian attitude towards helping has also helped. So then when new people come to the area a combination of all those things really pulls through and helps Holland have that distinguishing award.

GR: What things does the community still need to work on?

LV: We still need to work better at understanding people who are not still part of the mainstream, whether it be church-going or whether it be the socio-economic, or whether it be the educational or the political. We all have our stereotypical places where we would wish that everybody would fit, but many of us have not gotten there yet. So we really need to strive to understand others in their diversity and in their needs, and how we’re all contributing in whatever area we are and appreciate each other for what each one has to offer.

GR: What are some of the negative aspects of Holland?

LV: It goes along with what I just said. Everything is a double-edged sword. What is good is also...all you have to do is turn it a bit and it turns into a negative. With the churches, I think, stereotypically if you were not part of the Christian Reformed Church, then you were not viewed as acceptable. If you did not belong to a certain group, then you were not as acceptable. Twenty years ago, twenty-five years ago, if you didn’t live in Waukazoo Woods you were not viewed as acceptable. Now, of course, it’s Bay Meadows! But (laughs)...and so if you did not have a college
degree, if you did not have the two cars in the garage, if you did not have the boat in the driveway...all those status symbols. I think you're still viewed in a kind of negative way. We have to get past that and see the people for what people are, and gain an appreciation for the wealth of information that each one has as an individual, as a human being, and let go of the stereotypical kinds of status symbols that we seem to all have or want to have. Or wish that they would want to have! (Laughs)

GR: Describe the role that the church has played in your life.

LV: Because of all the low times in life, we all need to have something pull us through. Were it not for the church and the belief and the support that we get from the church, then it would not have helped to pull me through. Even though our church stereotypically did not look and still does not look as women going out and getting a degree being a positive, still held on to the beliefs because I figured the Pope was not going to come from Rome to help me raise my kids. And so I had to leave some of the ingrained kinds of things of my last generation and go on and say, "This is what will work better for me and for my children." The same thing with the childbirth and all the Catholic Church's view on that. But again, I figured the church was not going to help me raise my kids. Therefore, my husband and I chose to have only three children because we just figured we could provide better for them the less we had. And so again - the double edged sword. You go with the best parts of it and you try to diminish the parts you don't like so well. But underneath it all, the foundation, the belief helped pull me through the negative parts.

GR: What parish do you belong to?
LV: St. Francis.

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

LV: It was the only one at that point when we arrived in Holland, so it was natural to go and join there because it was the only one. Then when we split into two, the other church came to the north side and we still live in town. So therefore we still belong there, even though I work on the north side, I still live in town.

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

LV: I think it's an integral part, especially I think evident when our church burned. I think having that happen allowed some of the area churches to come to heed the need that we had at St. Francis, and then opened their doors to us as a congregation to meet in their churches which has allowed Hope College and has allowed the community to see us come in and see, "No, Catholics do not have horns and no... (Telephone interruption)...and do not have pitchforks in their hands." It has allowed them to see that we're okay. Therefore I think a lot of good things have happened as a result of that which before were viewed, and I think gone through, but only because it was expected of the churches. But when they actually practiced what they were preaching, I think now we're all the better for it. I see the future as getting better and better as a result of that with all the area churches.

GR: As you see it, what role does Hope College play in the community and vice-versa?

LV: I believe they're getting more and more involved, and I do think that the first thing that allowed Hope College to get more involved in the community was having the
CASA program housed there, the Upward Bound program housed there, which then allowed them to see populations that they had not been exposed to before. As a rule, I think that the students who attended Hope came and worked in the public schools, both in Holland and West Ottawa, but viewed the children that are serviced by Upward Bound and CASA more as looking at them under a microscope. Well, once housed in Hope, then Hope began to have their students work with the children in a closer manner which then allowed the students from Hope to go back and report to the professors the need that the children had which then in turn got more professors involved. And then grants were written and monies were gotten and more area agencies became involved because of the need that the children have. I think as a result of that, Hope has opened up their doors more which in turn has enriched the students that they have at Hope more than they would have otherwise.

GR: How has it changed throughout your life in Holland? Hope College.

LV: It has provided some classes, some workshops, a central meeting place. As a matter of fact, when we started the Hispanic Professionals, we met at Maas Center because it was so centralized. They provided many of the breakfasts for us. My oldest daughter worked with the CASA program and was involved in getting the Kick program started which is an offshoot of the CASA and the Upward Bound. My middle one worked in Upward Bound. My little one worked in Upward Bound. So you see, Hope has touched me in more ways than one. Plus it has provided students to come and work in my classroom and students who were thinking of perhaps making education their profession, both in the education field or in the psychology
field. So I've had many a student from Hope in my classroom.

GR: What is your heritage?

LV: My heritage is Mexican from my mom, Spanish from my dad. So I have mixture of the two.

GR: How do you see that heritage playing in your life today?

LV: I am very proud of both. Each one has its own unique culture and traditions and still have retained as many of them as possible and have passed that on to my children too, and now starting with the grandchildren - because I have two. My oldest one has a boy, Aaron, who's eight, and a daughter, Adrienne, who is five. So we're continuing now with the next generation already.

GR: Holland's diversity, as far as ethnicity, has been increasing over the past several years. What affect has this increasing diversification had on the community and you?

LV: I really like it from more than one point of view. First of all, as a professional, because more of minority professionals are moving in. Secondly, with those professionals come children and families which then made it nicer for my children because they had more of their kind in the area, which when my oldest one went through Holland High, I dare say she was the only Hispanic in most of her college prep courses. My children are five years apart, so by the time my second one went through Holland High there were a bit more. Then when the little one went through another five years later, then there were more of her kind in the classes and in the school. Because of that, I think the area has become enriched with all those minorities in it.
GR: How has the role of women changed over the past several decades?

LV: I think more and more of the women have taken their views and their talents and have put them to use in the community. I know in my culture alone that because the men were viewed then as being the sole breadwinners, they were all employed and the women were viewed as stay at home and took care of the children and the home. Then with the better socio-economic standing since the women had the free time, it allowed them to go to school. After being schooled, then they came back equipped better to get involved in so many areas. Therefore I believe that that's why so many of the women are becoming more and more involved in the community. I think many improvements are being made because of the involvement of so many of the women.

GR: How about within the work place, church, and education in itself?

LV: In the church, many of the women are involved in assisting the father, the deacon in whatever duties are needed to be done in church because we are not seeing many of the men continuing to take roles. Because of that, the church has seen the need to go to the women. I think if you will take a look at any school, the majority of the teachers are women. It seems that men are basically in the administrative positions in the educational field. Now more and more women are being promoted and being given administrator's roles, but it used to be women just used to be in the classroom, that was it. But now much gain has been made in seeing them go into higher positions within the educational field. And the third one was what?

GR: Within the family.

LV: I think because of the women viewing themselves in a more positive manner and have
seen what they can do, they have become stronger and have been more contributors in more areas than just within the family. In my regard, I believe because of all my experiences I was able to impress on the girls (as we have all girls) how important their role is. One, at home, because that you are really the first teacher your children have, and then out in the community because you would like to have everyone have a perfect family. But that’s not true. And so whatever good you have, expand to others and hopefully help them improve their lot in life.

GR: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland, and how do you think they have affected the community and yourself?

LV: Well, the very first one from losing the money from bi-lingual ed. I think all the way to then. At first when they lost all the funds, Holland Public Schools were really in dire straits because they had begun to depend on that money quite a bit. But then as a result of that, when they saw that the community supported what the program was doing, then Holland saw fit to scrounge up some money to have to program continue. Not to the depth or to the breadth that it was when it was in its heyday, but after going through some trying times they regrouped and the program is better now that it was when all the funds were lost. Secondly, we went through a time when going through the police department, a big discrepancy in how the minorities were treated when Mexican dances were held at the Civic Center versus when the Anglos had their dances, and Anglos were allowed to have drinks but not the Hispanics. So we had another big uproar about that. Of course much denying went on. But as a result, what was good enough for the goose was good enough for the gander, so then
therefore no one has drinks. Then thirdly, with the political needs I think having Luciano run and having him get the Republican Party to help him out, I think a big void that was there. So when we had the big blow up too about the commissioner saying, "Well," you know, "those Hispanics cannot speak English, but all you have to do is pull out a dollar and they'll spread out their hand," or something to that effect. We struggled through that and comments that are made in jest then are heard by the public and are reported in the newspapers. Then all of a sudden we have to reflect on what we said. And then we all learn by being raked over the coals sometimes. But I think every time we go through something like that, we just reflect and regroup again and then come out the better for it.

GR: Tell me about a job you’ve had in Holland that you really enjoyed. Or maybe that’s now?

LV: I enjoy the one that I have now the best, and that’s why I am where I am. But one that would kind of hold a close candle to what I do now is when I functioned as a quasi-administrator. I was in charge of the discipline and the children and the teachers’ aides on this side of the school. The reason I enjoyed it so much is because I was able to do everything that I do now plus work with the teachers and the teachers’ aides. But as a helping person, since I was not an administrator I did not evaluate. So then that’s why I enjoyed it (laughs).

GR: Was there a job in Holland that you really disliked?

LV: No. I enjoyed every single job I had there too. As a teacher’s aide, I worked during the day. I worked K-12 basically. I was a hairdresser while I was going to Grand
Valley. I enjoyed that, too, but every job I've had has always been a temporary one so that I could eventually get to where I am now! (Laughs) To take everything that I was gaining along the way and then pass it on to my students. It would make me a better teacher.

GR: Is there a perceivable generation gap in Holland? How would you define your generation and what sets it apart from others?

LV: Is there a generation gap? Yes. What sets mine apart from the one that we have now, the young upcoming one, is that my generation still had the work ethic which is true of yours too, I believe. Because of that, once we got a job we stayed there because there weren't that many jobs to be had. Therefore you put up with a lot of guff and put up with a lot of negative things because there weren't that many jobs to have. Whereas now, I think the present generation, well, they job hop! There's a whole different group now that don't want a regular job. They'd just as soon go to Manpower and work three or four days here, three or four days there. I know because my middle one works at Key Personnel and says, "Mom, we find them jobs - they quit! They don't want to have a regular job." So I think that's been a big difference in my generation versus the new generation. Another one is that aspiring to make your lot in life better. And those of you whom you will create. It seems that this present generation, I think both in your culture and mine, seem to not be so concerned with the future. That worries me a lot because it seems like we are having such a difficult time keeping a certain group of our kids and youth in school and see that, no they don't have to go to a four year institution, no, they don't have to go
study to be a lawyer or a doctor. But just to go get a trade, to go get a vocation, to get some skill - and we are not reaching them. For whatever reason we are not, and yes, there is a definite gap. Because of that, I think we are seeing the alarming rate of youth who are getting involved in negative activities because they don’t have anything to fill their lives. So they have a lot of free time on their hands and so what else are they going to do? They don’t go to school. They don’t work. So what are they going to do besides get into trouble? We still need to work hard in that arena. We really do.

GR: Have the problems and concerns of the average Holland citizen changed over the past years you have been in town? How is daily life different because of that?

LV: When I first came here and my husband and my oldest daughter first arrived here, people didn’t worry about locking doors. People didn’t worry about locking cars. You could feel safe to walk anyplace at any time of the day or night and feel reasonably safe. That has changed dramatically. With the discovery of so many of us out there of Holland having the base that it does with the industry and the jobs and the opportunity that is here, then, of course, the word spreads. Then with the new people who come in, we get people who come into who bring negative kinds of attitudes and thinkings and likelihoods that are negative. We are so close to Chicago and Detroit and we’re in the middle kind of, so the people who did not "fit" in those towns anymore, you know, are unsuitable. They cannot live there anymore. They have to go someplace and so where do they go? To an attractive sounding place that not only has jobs if you want to work, but there are also people who are working and
who have nice things in their homes and will provide by breaking and entering, doing whatever, a livelihood for them. So I think that’s why we’re getting more and more of the negative kinds of things happening in our community, which then has triggered the change in the whole area as far as viewing safety and what you can or cannot do at certain times of the day or night.

GR: How are the concerns of young adults different than that with which you were concerned at that age?

LV: I believe many of the concerns that the children have now are comparable. I think the only thing that differs is the degree. We always had an unfavorable or undesirable element in school. It’s just that because of sheer numbers it seems that there’s more. But there’s more of us! I mean, more people! And so, whatever was negative then has just been intensified because of sheer numbers.

GR: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life while in Holland?

LV: I think for me as a professional it was being involved in community things. My first involvement came on the Human Relations Commission. When I joined that commission and met so many people from the community then they in turn knew me and got to know at least one Hispanic at that point and got to see that well, maybe if this one is okay, maybe there are others out there are okay. Because many of us were not involved in community things at that point. So that was a big turning point for me. One of the members turned out to be my boss in Holland Public Schools, Mr. Ihrman was there. I just got more doors opened and more and more doors opened and so then it really helped later on.
GR: Would you say that he was a significant person in that change in your life?

LV: Yes, he was. Because he saw me differently from any other person because we sat together. We met together. We ate together. We did all those things that we got to do through that commission. And therefore got to see the person behind the name. So as a result of that, when the assistant superintendent told me, "Will you see what you can do, Lydia, from your end to recruit people for those eight slots that Grand Valley gave us, I think because Don, Mr. Ihman, knew me then he thought well, if Lydia is doing it, it must be okay, and I know she will get it done! (Laughs) So then had he not known me, then probably he would not have been so trusting to allow me… I mean, - here I am, a teacher’s aide! And try to recruit people to go to Grand Valley. I mean, when do you see that! (Laughs). And so yes. He was a big, important person in my life.

GR: How have your priorities changed over the course of your life here?

LV: I’ve done a complete circle. Now that I’m a grandma, I’ve given up so many of little community things I used to do and so many committees that I used to serve on and all that to allow me to have free time. So then I can spend time with my grandkids because I think it’s important for me to spend some time with them. So I see that as a very important role to continue passing on whatever little bit I can to them! (Laughs)

GR: Has your commitment to faith gotten easier or harder?

LV: To faith? No, it’s not gotten any harder. Nor has it gotten any easier! Waver between the two! I think with every improvement that you make or try to make,
there is some disillusion. So it’s in what you learn when you try to make an improvement then you are disillusioned and then you take a look at it. How come it didn’t work? And then learn from that and so you don’t repeat the same mistake again. But, no, faith is still there! Still carrying through!

GR: What about your commitment to the community?

LV: My commitment to the community hasn’t changed either. But because there are so many younger professional people then I feel well, leave them room for them to do their thing. In my generation we did the best that we could at that time, and now new strategies, new blood, new attitudes need to be used and so give them room to do what they can! And of course, if they call and ask for assistance - always we’ll be there. We’ll still continue trying to do the little bit that I can. But not as actively or in the forefront as I was once upon a time.

GR: Can you tell me a little about the bilingualism in the school system of non-native speakers of English in Holland?

LV: The bilingualism in what regard?

GR: How has it helped or affected the community?

LV: I do believe that having people be bilingual has enriched the community because it allows all those people who are bilingual or in some cases trilingual or (laughs) quadlingual...allows people to communicate in more ways that one. Because when you learn a language, you can’t help but learn the culture, the traditions, all that. So it so enriches those who come in contact with you. Or will seek you out to help them translate or help them with their work. And it provides an avenue for new arrivals
who are perhaps not English speakers to have a person who is capable of speaking their language communicate with them, and be the intermediary between you and they.

(End of interview)