

This is an oral history interview with Armando Labra at the Center for Working Class Studies in Youngstown Ohio on the 24th of June 2009. I'm Sherry Linkon.

S – Thank you for sitting down to talk to me.

A – Thank you very much.

S – I want to start with some of your history. Where were you born?

A – I was born San Luis Potosi Mexico which is about 5 hours by bus north of Mexico City. Right now, San Luis Potosi is a city of probably 800,000 people.

S – What was it like there when you were a kid?

A – Actually, I grew up about 35 minutes outside of the city in a very small town called El Porvenir. We lived in an adobe house because my father had been transferred there to set up a camp. At the time, my father was working for a, like the, Department of Transportation and to take care of roads and things like that. So my father was sent there and that's basically where I grew up until I was about 5. The house was probably about the size of my garage but I guess it was the happiest there then than I have ever been.

S – Why?

A – Just being so carefree.

S – Being a kid.

A – Being a kid. Being up to 5.

S – And, how long did you live there?

A – Uh, right up to the age of 5.

S – And then you moved...

A – We moved to the city because my father had bought a house in the city and he felt that there was more opportunities for the family in the city than it would be a half hour away from the city.

S – Did he change his job at that point or did you just move?

A – No, he commuted there and I actually commuted with him for about half a year. I remember getting up at 6 o'clock in the morning and walking about a mile and then catching a ride to my dad's, you know, to our old town where my dad worked.

S – Why were you commuting?

A – Because I was in like pre-kindergarten, or something like that.

S – So, to just to stay in school...

A – To stay in school, yes.

S – And then how long did you live in the city?

A – Well, then I lived in the city until I was about 17.

S – And at that point?

A – Then, after 17, I moved to the States.

S – And where did you go when you first came?

A – When I first came to the States, I was in Dallas Texas for a couple months and then I moved to a small town north of Salem called Greenford Ohio.

S – How do you get from Dallas Texas to Greenford Ohio? What prompted that move?

A – Friends. Job. And a curiosity to know where Ohio is.

S – (laughter) Was there something about Ohio that you knew or this was just a different place?

A – I had no idea where in the world Ohio would be, but I'd heard of Cleveland, though. Even when I was in Mexico, Cleveland was, boy, Cleveland, Cleveland, but I, we clicked that it was in the state of Ohio.

S – Why would it? When you first left Mexico to go to Dallas, what prompted you to make that move?

A – Well, I had been working for, at 17, I had been working at least 8 years doing different jobs. Washing cars, selling papers, all these little jobs but I had grown up tired of poverty and I said to myself, with another friend, "hey, there's a whole world out there. Let's go check it out." So, um, against my father's wishes, uh, and against my father's blessings, one day I said, "Dad, I'm leaving tomorrow." So, he thought for sure that I was totally crazy and so before my father came home from work, I went to the train station to pick up, come up to the States. And, right about before the time where the train was about to leave did I see my dad out the window. My dad is running, looking for me. He steps on the car and he says, "Oh my god, son, you're leaving." And I said, "yes, I am. I'm gone." And he begged me once again not to leave but at that point there was nothing he could do. So he took a while, nodding, and said, you know, "remember that you always have a home, whatever happens." So my dad, um, that's how I remember it.

S – Why Dallas? Was there something there?

A - Yeah, I had grown up seeing Dallas on TV. You know, the show “Dallas.” We even had that there and I remember watching that on a black and white TV and it just seemed so glamorous. It just seemed such a beautiful place with a huge infrastructure and when my friend said “let’s go to Dallas” that sounded like the right place to go.

S – So when you went to Dallas, what kind of work did you do there?

A – Well, I worked in construction. I had never done that type of job for, that was new to me and I was fairly young so um, one of my friends there, I looked for a job just walking up to the construction sites and people always, you know, I was 17. It was a neat experience to try to find a job, just going out there and in the construction sites. But, yeah, I found a job and I was there for a couple months.

S – So then you went from there to Greenford Ohio.

A – Yes.

S – You came in part because you knew people here but also because there was work here.

A – Yeah.

S – What kinds of work were you doing here?

A – Well, I was working at a mushroom farm as soon as I got here in December of ’84. Within two days, I was working at a mushroom farm in North Lima Ohio. And then, thereafter, there was a job at the place where I was living which was a fruit farm and of course, a fruit farm, an apple farm, you know that’s spring, summer, fall. Also, it fit very well with the mushroom farm because it’s inside so, you know. I was there for a couple of years and then, I wasn’t really that great of a farm worker. (Laughter) And my boss picked that up and he said, “hey, Armando, don’t you want to go to school? Seems like you have the desire to learn the language.” And I said, “yeah, that’s something that I want to do but I just don’t have a way of doing it because I have to support myself.” So years later, he proposed to me, he says “you know, you can work for me in the spring and the summer and fall and you can go to school.” So yeah, that’s what I did. I went to South Grange for one year of high school. I was the oldest guy on the yellow bus for a year.

S – And is that where learned English or did you know some English before you came? What’s your history with the language?

A – Yeah, in school in Mexico, I learned a little bit but I was the poorest English student there ever was. So I learned some things, very basic things, could read a couple things but here is where I learned.

S – And, when you were in Dallas and when you first came to Ohio, what difficulties, if any, did you run into because of language? Because of not knowing English well.

A – Once I was here? Yeah, once I was here, the toughest thing was to go to the post office to mail something to my parents. And, just being thoroughly lost and uh, the first time here but I remember the generosity of people trying to help. I remember that for the first maybe a year or so until I really kind of got a handle on the language. But, yeah, it was frustrating trying to get, you know, feel like, I don't know, like you're crazy, you know, "speak a little louder because I don't understand you."

S – So how long were you working in farming?

A – I worked for at least two and a half, three years.

S – And then, did you stay in the area at that point and move into another kind of work? Did you go back at some point? What was the next step in your life?

A – Well, the next step in my life was that, I moved to Chicago. Um, and I was there for maybe eight months. I wanted to try my luck in a different place. I thought, man, this is crazy. I'm in the States. Greenford, Ohio, there's nothing to do. There's absolutely nothing. And I come from a city where you see people walking and running, and it just, not there nothing there in the wintertime. So I got an invitation to go to Chicago to try my luck there in construction but that didn't work out either. That's when I called my boss again, here in Greenford, and I said, "You know, I'm ready to go back. Can I work for you?" It's gonna be fall, and he said, "Yeah, come back." And that fall, and that fall he said, "if you want to go to school, let's give this a shot." So that's when I went to school.

S – This guy, sounds like he was a sort of great find, and that you got lucky in having someone who really helped you out. Am I hearing that right?

A – Yeah, he's like a father figure to me. I mean, um, not like a father, he was a father figure to me. He's one of the most influential guys in my life. I mean, half my life I spent in this area and in a lot of ways, I... he and his wife and his family have given me guidance, let's put it that way. Sometimes, I'm not, I'm not very well taking any guidance from anybody, like everybody else, but they have, he's been in a lot of ways like a family figure to me.

S – When you finished high school at South Range, what next?

A – Well, I did one year of high school and I was taking also, classes in Salem to improve my English skills and I took a GED test. I passed and then I came to YSU for a year and then um, after one year at YSU, I wanted to study aviation so I moved to Pennsylvania and then I studied to become a professional pilot but, it's a very rich profession to go into. I mean you have to have a lot of money to spend. Well, anyway, I didn't make the cut. I'm a private pilot and I'm an air traffic controller but my dream of becoming an airline pilot never materialized. But, once in a while, I enjoy sitting in a small airplane and then just going up for a ride.

S – So you went to Pennsylvania for school for a while.

A – Yeah.

S – During that period, so by this point you're about how old?

A – I'm in my 20s.

S – Did you go back to Mexico to visit your family at all in that period? Were you in touch with them during that period?

A – Yeah, at the time, yeah. It took me three years to go back to Mexico and then I remember going back in my own car. In my own neighborhood with my friends, and only three years have only passed which is not very a long time and that felt so good. I just felt like, wow, this pretty good.

S – What was your father's response to that because he had been worried about you coming here but now you come back and you've been pretty successful? What did he think?

A – Um, he..., I never really asked him. He just, he was just happy for me. He happy to know that even though I was quite far away, I was kind of trying to do the right thing. It's something that I could never do over there, even with his guidance. (laughter)

S – When you determined that you couldn't become an airline pilot, what did you do then?

A – Well, I got a job offer at General Motors and then, General Motors seemed to be pretty good. I eventually thought, well, if I'm going to work at General Motors and finance my education to fulfill my dream of becoming an airline pilot. But, have a good job, you start settling in, you say, it's too long, it takes too long, I'm going to be fifty by the time I become a pilot. I may as well take the extra time, you know, overtime, and stuff like that. So I kind of, how should I say this, I just felt comfortable working for GM. And, (this here?) needed to do anything else.

S – When did you start working at GM?

A – I think I started in 1991. I started temporarily, as summer help. Go there work a couple months and go back to school and pay for my lessons. So I did that for at least two or three years, work during the summer and then finally, I got a... they offered to work for them so I took it. And my wife, now, she also had a job offer. She's a teacher. So right around the same time, she gets a job offer, a local one. I get my job offer at GM so, it's kind of like, well, this is set.

S - All the pieces are falling into place.

A – Yeah.

S – And what was your job at GM?

A – I worked as a tow motor driver, as a fork lift driver, I worked in the presses, I did, um, welder, all kinds of things.

S – And, you said that your wife had, at that point, gotten a job offer as a teacher so somewhere in that process leading up to your starting to work at GM, you had met her. Where did you two meet?

A – Actually, I met my wife the second day I was in Ohio.

S – Really?

A – Yeah, and well, working for...at the farm, the person, John Huffman, that's his name, his family, they attended Greeford Christian Church. So there's nothing much to do in the middle of the wintertime in Greenford so the youth group at the Greenford Christian Church was happening at the time, so I was introduced to the youth group at Greenford Christian Church. And then, I met my wife. And then, we dated ever since, we dated for about 5 years until something, you know, until she could finish school or something like that. Till I could do something with my life.

S – So it...I want to go back for a minute to that time in Greenford because the way you're describing it makes it sound as if, almost as if you were part of the family, and as you said, that this family kind of became your family over time. When you first started working there, how many people were working on this farm?

A – There was probably five or six people. Two of them, three of them, the whole year round, and the other two or three were added in the spring.

S – And you were living on the farm.

A – We were living on the farm.

S - So you really did become almost a family.

A – Yeah.

S – So you start working at GM. Where were you living at that point? Because you're obviously no longer in Greenford.

A – No, I'm no longer in Greenford. When I get the job in GM, I was working in, no I was living in North Lima. I lived there, we rented a house there for two or three years, and then we started having kids. So we were ready to have one, so then two, so we looked for another house. So we lived in Canfield.

S – And you've been there now for, how many years?

A – Probably ten, eleven years.

S – I know that at this point in your history here in Youngstown, you're pretty active with the local Mexican community. When did you first start making connections in that community?

A – Yeah. Well, I was not very familiar with Youngstown. I was living, of course, there, and then, the big city was Salem. That's pretty in ten miles radius of Greenford. Youngstown really wasn't the place but I knew that there was a Latino community here. So I remember picking up the Yellow Pages, you know, and looking there, if there was an organization that I could, that I could go to. That I could maybe do something. So, um, I came upon the Mexican Club through their dances, May 5th, Cinco de Mayo and September 16th. So, those type of events kind of drew me to the club. And then I started talking to people, to leadership, and I said, "well, what does it take for me to participate?" Oh, you have to pay dues, and blah, blah, blah, so, that's what I did and then I think somebody said, well, um, I went to the meeting, to one of the monthly meetings and I signed up to be a member. And then, they say "so why do you want to become a member," so I had to explain the whole lot. "I want to be part of this community. I want to perhaps see if I can do something." So, yeah, I was welcomed at the club.

S – That happened after you had moved to Canfield or was that when you were in North Lima or when you were still in Greenford?

A – No, that was when I was living in North Lima yet.

S – And, before that, when you were in Greenford, was there any sense of a Latino community in that area?

A – Not at all.

S – Were there other Latinos living in that area or were you pretty much it.

A – Yeah.

S – Well, that would... (laughter). So what was the Mexican Club like at the point you first joined it? Who were its members? What kinds of things were they doing? What mattered to them? What's your sense of that group?

A – My sense of the group was that was that here was this older ladies and men who were trying to carry out the tradition of their fathers. Because, if I remember, well, most of them were not the founding members. This is already the second generation and I... it was touching to me, for me to see that. And that, they're trying to carry on the traditions of their fathers. And, they, you know, through this travels, they have other building, they had their restaurant running, and they were doing things. So I was inspired by them.

S – When you first became involved with that group, were, you were saying that most of them, they, their families had been here for a couple of generations. Were there other people involved who, like you, were more recent immigrants or were you sort of the "fresh blood?"

A – I was basically the first one, of the youngest ones who went and approached the club and I said I want to be a member. What does it take? And I... then later on, people came. Younger

people came and we had readings that were just full of people. We had, yes, something exciting happened at that point. At least in my view. I like... (laughter)

S – Well, I guess part of what I'm wondering then, is how that happens. I mean there's a group that represents one generation. There begins to be more people from younger generations coming. How is that contact made? When you, as you said, you picked up the phone book and looked them up, was that what other people were doing? Or was there a point when you began to reach out to newer immigrants?

A – Yeah, that's what we did.

S – And how do you do that?

A – Just by letting people know that, hey, we're here, and then we're doing something exciting. We have this kitchen open, we opening on Saturday nights. Come on, let's talk about whatever you want to talk about. We're going to have a party on Saturdays. Things like that. So, that's how more people started coming and people who didn't know each other started making connections as to, well, what do you do? What kind of job do you do? Hey, maybe I can... you can fix me up with a job? Things like that. Networking, as we call it.

S – From your perspective, how's the Mexican community here, the Latino community here, changed over the time that you've been here?

A – Yeah, is changed and uh, how should I say this? Perhaps, the younger people have maybe changed, uh, and have been changed by the older Latinos in the area. So there have been, it has been sort of like a give and take and a learning experience for both. The younger people learn from the older, more well, better set, settled Mexicans and then they learn something from us. You know, maybe, some of our traditions that may have not known or might have forgotten that, it rubs off on them.

S – Can you think of things that maybe for you as an individual or that you've seen for other people that the newer immigrants have learned from the older immigrants? I guess what I'm asking for are concrete examples.

A – Well, I think the older, or the more settled, or the second generation or the third generation is uh, making emphasis to...and I hear 'em often talking to people, "hey, you know, it's important to learn English. You live in the area. It's important to communicate." Advice. And, mostly advice. Good type advice.

S – So it really started helping people find their way.

A – Yeah.

S – There is for both that older generation, people whose families have been here for a couple of generations now, and now, for you, additional generations where people are a little bit further removed from that original experience, if you will, of living in Mexico, and I wonder as you look

at your own children who were born here, have grown up here, I assume they have spent some time in Mexico, but this is really their home. Do you think being Mexican means something different to them than it does to you?

A – Well, yeah, definitely. Oh, absolutely. For them, it's, they know it's part of their heritage and uh, they're trying to learn to speak Spanish. We love music so I'm always teaching them songs where we play guitar and always...and they're very much part of that. So that, and, you know, I'm always cooking something so uh, they themselves, as I know, feel very much Mexican but I am a lot more Mexican than they are.

S – Well, some of it then, is about time and the relationship with the place and ...

A – Sure.

S – you remember where you grew up.

A – Yeah, yeah.

S – Some of it is also about family background.

A – Exactly.

S – You're Mexican, your wife is not. Do your children also have another kind of identity or is Mexican their primary identity just somewhat less so than it is for you?

A – Yeah. Well, they're very much, let's say, American, right? But their Mexican-ness is very much alive. And they don't make any secrets about it. Their friends know that, "hey, I'm Mexican." But they're white, or whatever it is. So, but, I sense, I see my children with a sense of security as to who they are because I always tell them, you know, that this is who you are and let's learn the language, let's learn your music, and let me know if... what kinds of things you hear in school. So we maintain an open communication and it's funny, you know, the children in school with their friends, when they're... I remember when they were like five or six, seven, there's nothing about their identity from their friends. They maybe noticed but not too much, but once they're about eighth grade, then, "hey, Mexican" or things like that. But my children have learned to be strong enough to understand that it is themselves who have to be sure of themselves.

S – You know, that raises another issue which is, you're talking about your children's experience with people making comments and such. In your experience having come here, and you've been here longer and you're life path here is different from theirs, what kinds of experiences with discrimination did you have?

A – I think that the... the less you speak the language, the more you're about to be discriminated against. The more you look different, the more you, the more you're about to be discriminated against. So perhaps, maybe... in the first couple years, I did experience that because of the

language barrier. Because people are frustrated, at the grocery store, so, you know, they may make a remark or something like that. But, yeah, that's as far as my experience has been.

S – So generally you found people to be, they treat you like anybody else...

A – Yeah

S – and just hasn't been much of an issue.

A – Yeah, yeah.

S – Have you taken your children back to Mexico? To see your family?

A – Yes.

S – What is that like?

A – My children loved the traveling to Mexico to see my parents and playing in the neighborhood and all those things. Once they're there, they, in a couple months, they pick up a lot of Spanish. So this is a great experience for them. Yeah.

S – And, what is it like for you to go back now?

A – It is really nice. I feel like lost because the city has grown so much. I don't know any of my friends, but I don't see any of my old friends. It's been so long so... yeah.

S – Okay. You have become involved, in the last few years, it might be longer than that, with the... a council that is interested in thinking about the relationships between Mexico and Mexicans who are living outside of their home country. How did you get involved in that?

A – Well, I was, I was elected, to, to serve for three years. The Mexican consulate was reaching out to communities and I think it was in 2004. And, somebody from my club approach me and they said, "we met the consul in Akron. He wants to talk to you." And at that point, I said, "what would he want to talk to me about? I have nothing really to talk to him about." And, uh, I got a call from him and, uh, we set up an appointment and we met. He asked me about my organization. I showed him some things that we had done and who we were and stuff like that.

S – Then, you were at that point the president of the Mexican Club.

A – Yeah, at that point I was the president of Mexican Club. So we meet and he tells me, "look. A lot of the stuff that you're doing, we want to look for ways to support what you're doing. And one way for you to do this is, not only, uh, at a level... it would be at a much greater level. You perhaps would have a chance to influence how we do things. How I manage. How I do things in my office." So that sounded pretty exciting and then an invitation... he would send an invitation to several other place who were, who were people like myself, interested in the community. So he send an invitation to different parts in the northern part of Ohio and there was a contest. And

I won that contest. So, I became part of (*enliste tu todos Mexicanos en le excedio...???*) (33:21:6 – unsure)

S – And how long have you been doing that now?

A – Uh, I did it for three years.

S- Then you've now rotated off.

A – Then I have rotated off. Yeah. We have a new *consejera*, is in Painesville Ohio. A lady who's done tremendous work, not somebody who just came out of the woodwork three months ago, but somebody who's had a background of thirty years advocating, fighting for her community. So, yeah.

S – That phrase, fighting for her community, um, I guess raises another issue, which is about the mission, perhaps, of organizations like the Mexican Club, like this, the consulate, that kind of thing, which is advocating for the rights and opportunities and status and conditions of Mexicans living in this area. You are in a position, you have been for a while now, of being a leader in the local Mexican community. Are there things that you have been fighting for, that you would like to see people fighting for, in terms of making change?

A – I like to see the community, specially the older community, no let's not... the community, the very well established community in the area, I would like to see them speak up. I've known them, some of them to be very well respected people. People who have served in the armed forces, people who have given so much, and are very much part of this community and I like them to speak up when they hear on the radio, uh, just pretty good bad stuff. You know, people get carried away because there's a microphone and "Mexicans this, and Mexicans that," and I like one of them to pick up the phone and say, "wait a minute. The people who you're talking to, that's my people. That's me. And what are you saying about these people. Let me tell you something about my story, before you decide to paint us as whatever, criminals, what have you." I want them to speak up and let the community know of their contributions to this area, to this state and to this country. I want them to speak out because the community needs to hear from them.

S – So I have one last question for you which is really wide open, which is, is there anything I haven't asked you to talk about that you think ought to be part of this, things I haven't thought of, things that you've been thinking about that you think are important for me to be thinking about.

A – Ah, that's a great question, you know. I've, um, you know, probably on my way to my house, I'll remember that. You know, I'll remember how many things I should have said and how I should have said them and, yeah, but right now, I'm just, I thank you so much for the interview.

S – And, thank you. I really appreciate your sitting down to talk with me.