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Coming to the Plains

Juan Carlos Guzmán, Interviewee
Leslie García, Primary Interviewer
Dr. Michelle Warren, Secondary Interviewer
Jacob Rosdail, Videographer

Tepic Nayarit, Mexico

Interview Date: 4/10/2018

[00:29]

GARCÍA: We begin by stating a full name... and it says town of origin, and then can he say where he lives now?

WARREN: Both.

GUZMÁN: Okay. My name is Juan Carlos Guzmán. I was born in Tepic Nayarit, Mexico, and came to the United States when I was fourteen years old, and I currently live in Gibbon, Nebraska, which is fourteen miles from here.

GARCÍA: Can you tell me, why did you leave your hometown?

GUZMÁN: My family, like many other migrant families, came to this country because we were struggling financially. I remember not having enough food on our tables, and also at that time, my dad came to the United States legally to work under the Bracero Program, back in the 80's. So, he was invited to come to the United States to work in agriculture. We were without a dad and struggling financially, so that's the main reason why we came to the United States.

[01:46]

GARCÍA: Can you tell me about your experience coming here?

GUZMÁN: Caray! I still got nightmares. My dad tried to bring us legally to the United States through Immigration Services, but the INS told him that we were supposed to... Well, we were on a ten- or twelve-year waiting list, and obviously at that time we had already been without our dad for almost three years, and dad realized that it was going to be too long. So, he made the decision for us to come illegally. So, my experience coming to the United States was crossing the river, being chased by people from both sides of the border. Like I mentioned, sometimes I still get nightmares because I was holding my mom's hand and my brother's, and we were running

Coming to the Plains

and it's... it feels like you're running for your life. And, so my experience getting to the United States, it wasn't very pleasant.

[03:01]

GARCÍA: Can you tell me about your first impressions of the United States?

GUZMÁN: Obviously when you're in Mexico, when you're in your native country, people say beautiful things about the United States, but they don't tell you the current reality, the reality that we experience once we arrive here, especially when you're undocumented. I was fourteen at that time, in a different country, in California where you don't really need to know the language to survive. My impression was, "Wow we made it. We're going to live better. We're going to have other opportunities." But once I got older, I truly realized that there were no opportunities given to us. You need to work hard to get those opportunities, or to create those opportunities.

[04:07]

GARCÍA: How were you treated when you first arrived to the U.S.?

GUZMÁN: Like a kid that didn't speak the language, that didn't know better, that, for a while, felt that I was going to be just another statistic, another Latino that wasn't going to make it living in Los Angeles. People not believing in me, in the things that I wanted to do, you know. And... and like more than anything, [longer pause] experiencing a little bit of racism and discrimination, too.

GARCÍA: Are you treated differently now?

GUZMÁN: [laughs] Well, it's different now. You know, I'm a professional now. I'm older. I'm still experiencing a little bit of racism and bias from people.... But I can tell you that I'm now the guy that is on the front lines making sure that that doesn't happen to others. As I grew older and became aware of racism, discrimination, and the reasons why this happens, I became more involved in social justice and working here at the Office of Multicultural Affairs really allowed me to be up there, defending and protecting my students that are from diverse backgrounds, too. But I do experience a little bit of discrimination even though I'm a professional now.

[05:59]

GARCÍA: Going with that, can you tell me about your work experience here?

GUZMÁN: I love my work. I love helping my students. I love being able to be part of their college journey. I love the fact that I'm a part of their dreams of becoming someone in life through higher education. I love giving scholarships to them, and... to celebrate, to cry with

Coming to the Plains

them. I think it brings me a different, a more personal, satisfaction, being able to see more and more diverse students graduating. I'm always fighting all the time for them. I'm a strong advocate for DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival] students, too, so my job is very rewarding, but it is challenging because sometimes we have to work with the system that is in place, that is not in place to help a lot of our students.

[07:18]

GUZMÁN: Currently, I'm the director for the Office of Multicultural Affairs. My job title or description is to help diversify my institution, so I do the recruitment and the retention of multicultural, diverse students to our institution.

[08:06]

GARCÍA: What are some of the major challenges you've faced while being here and arriving here?

GUZMÁN: Yeah, I think that when you come to another country and you don't really know the culture of that country and the language, it is challenging, but I also know that it is up to you to push yourselves, to learn about the culture, to learn about the languages. But I think the more challenging aspect of me being in this country, from the beginning, was being undocumented. Not having the documentation to legally apply for a job, or to even get any scholarships when I started my college career. That's what a lot of my students are experiencing nowadays. Not only is it my students being undocumented but them having a mixed family where either mom and dad is undocumented, and so our students develop this type of anxiety because they're here, but they also want to be there with their families, too.

[09:28]

And, obviously, they worry just like I worried back in the day about immigration taking my mom away, because the only one that was legal at that point was my dad, and no one else from the family other than my dad. We waited for almost twelve years before we became legal in this country. So that was very challenging. Living in the shadows is always scary. Not being able to do a lot of things, to experience the democracy or the freedom of this country because you're missing that little piece of paper.

[10:07]

Another funny story... not funny, but it's real... When I came to California, I actually didn't experience any culture shock. California is a very diverse place. You have people from all over the world, especially Central America, Mexico, you name it. It was very comfortable because there were a lot of people who looked like me, who spoke the same language as me. Even at

Coming to the Plains

school, we had people translating, we experienced bilingual education. My culture shock was when we moved to Nebraska. That was when I really experienced moving to a different country for the first time. It was back in the 90s... The Latino population in the state of Nebraska was very low. In Grand Island, we were probably one of ten students that were Latinos. Grand Island Senior High didn't even have an English as a Second Language Program until we arrived. They created something for us.

[11:12]

But, other than that, Nebraska is different from California, and the population, and everything too was very different. I remember my mom not liking Nebraska because they didn't have any Latino food. Nowadays, you have entire aisles in Walmart that are just Latino food and stuff like that. So, the demographics have changed. Like I said, I didn't experience that cultural shock and I didn't experience any racism or discrimination until I came to Nebraska.

[11:52]

GARCÍA: Okay, so what are some differences and similarities in the culture here and back home?

GUZMÁN: Well, back home in Mexico is a whole different... It's just different. I can't even describe it. It's a different way of living life. I honestly feel that life here in the United States is always working, working, working, you know. And worrying about the future and saving money for the future. When I go back home for vacations and things like that, our families, they don't have a lot of money, and I'm pretty sure they don't save a lot of money, but they really enjoy life. Especially here in the state of Nebraska, during the wintertime, it's depressing to go to work when it is dark and come back home when it's dark. And I think it's just that. We tend to work and work, and we don't enjoy life the way we are supposed to. So, that's something that I see being different from my country. Obviously, we can talk about food, music, all those traditions that you don't have here in the United States, especially in Nebraska, or this area of Nebraska, because it's still not at all diverse.

[13:42]

GARCÍA: Okay... What were your expectations, goals, or hopes when you came to the United States, and have they been met?

GUZMÁN: Alright. I want to start by saying that I did not want to come to the United States. I was fourteen. I was thinking about becoming a teacher. I knew it was going to be hard. I cried and cried to my parents because I had a good life. Even though we were in poverty, I was really creating my own future in Mexico. And at fourteen, you got your friends, you got your girlfriend

Coming to the Plains

for the first time, things like that, and I was very comfortable to the point that I did not want to come to the United States. And it was my dad who sat with me and told me, “This is the reason why we are doing this. You're the oldest one, and basically, you're in charge now, when I'm not here,” and he also shared with me that his dream for us was to have a better future. And he taught me that, “When I die, I'm not going to... leave you a lot of money. I'm not going to have a will for you guys, but my will is for you guys to have an education and to have a better future.” So, I took that and ran with it. I really took into consideration what my dad told me, and even though they didn't have any money to help me when I was in school and everything, I took that opportunity, those sacrifices of moving to this country to make something better... for me, for my future, but also for them because that was also their dream. So, you know, I'm here, being a professional and educated guy with two master's degrees, considering a Ph.D. now. Yes, that was my dream, that was my parents' dream. Both my mom and dad have passed away now. I'm pretty sure they're very proud of everything that I have accomplished, and they know that I will definitely continue to do more.

[16:20]

WARREN: Ask about his immediate family that he grew up with, his siblings and their ages and what they've been through, and then his own kids.

GARCÍA: I was going to say, who he came with...

WARREN: Because he mentioned he was holding hands with his... yeah.

[16:36]

GARCÍA: So, who came with you when you immigrated, and who did you leave behind? And what did they do?

GUZMÁN: I came to the United States with my mom and my younger brother. My sister, I have an older sister. I'm the middle child. My sister was married at that time, and so she didn't come with us. She joined us later on. But when we came to the United States the first time, it was my mom and my younger brother.

[17:26]

GUZMÁN: Who did I leave behind? Yeah. People don't understand that when we move to this country, we leave everything behind. Your few possessions that you have, but you leave all your family. I remember when I was going through the immigration process, I wasn't able to travel outside of the United States and my grandparents died, and I couldn't be there for them. That's the sacrifice that we make when we come to this country—leaving our families behind and not being able to come back until you fix your immigration status. And so, while we were here...

Coming to the Plains

waiting to get our papers in order, a lot of my family members died, got married, had quinceañeras and you're not there. You're not part of those celebrations. You're not there to say your last goodbye to a lot of your family members. And that's the ultimate price for us as we're trying to accomplish the American Dream.

[18:51]

GARCÍA: Okay. Can you tell me about your current family here?

GUZMÁN: Yeah, I'm married. I have three kids. They're too old. One is in high school, is going to be a senior next year. The other one is at the community college right now here in Kearney [Nebraska], and my oldest one, my crazy one, she is a tattoo artist, so she is early studying her profession. She is really good at it. She is a good artist. I always push her to do school, but it wasn't for her, but now she has found her own passion. My wife, she works from home for an insurance company and... Let's see. We moved to Gibbon, Nebraska about two years ago. But my family in Grand Island is my older sister and my younger brother and their families. On my mom's side of the family, I have four uncles that live in Nebraska as well, but everyone from my dad's side of the family is in Mexico.

[20:16]

ROSDAIL: I was just going to ask, what brought you to Nebraska? Please?

GUZMÁN: Alright.

GARCÍA: What brought you to Nebraska?

GUZMÁN: It was really hard for me to believe why we came to Nebraska. And I didn't even know the reasons why. So, we used to live in Los Angeles, California. There's a lot of people there. My dad was working for a construction company and my mom was working in this factory, but she travelled four hours just to get to that factory. And it didn't work out. So, we then moved to Hemet, California which is close to the San Diego area. And my dad was working for this company again, and the company went out of business. Somehow, they were recruited to come work in the meat packing industry. All the way from California, they got an invitation to come. My mother's brothers came first to check it out, and they realized that the meat packing plant was good work, well paid, very hard-- they didn't say it was a really hard job, you know? So, our family just up and moved to Nebraska, the Good Life [state slogan]. Now, I always use that, because when you're driving through in either direction, there's a big sign that says, "Nebraska: The good life." And, it has been a good life. When I was in California, I was getting in a lot of trouble with gangs and drugs and stuff like that because it was like everybody my age was doing that. And there were not many opportunities for us to succeed in school or in

Coming to the Plains

academics. The same way that I was very upset because I didn't want to move from Mexico to the United States, I was very upset to move from California to Nebraska. And that's because at that age, you're just getting used to being in a place and you're building relationships, and you just don't want to move, you know? And at that age you also don't understand that the situation is crazy, the burden of making enough money to pay rent, and to survive. So, yeah, we came to Nebraska, the good life, because of job opportunities and for us it was a really good move, too, because we were able to move away from all those problems...I think that if I had stayed in California, I would probably be in jail or dead, or I wouldn't have the same opportunities that I had here in the state of Nebraska. So, it has been a really good move even though I didn't like or appreciate it much back then.

[23:41]

GARCÍA: Can you tell us about when you moved here, and what you did, and then your college career up until now?

GUZMÁN: Sure... So, when I came to Nebraska, I think that year, it was six or seven of us Latino students that were new to the district, were new to the high school, and we were all ELI [English Language Institute] students. Many of us at different levels. My brother and I were a little more advanced because we had already experienced some education in California, but when we arrived in Grand Island, Nebraska, they [school district] were not ready for us. And that's when the first wave of migration came to the Midwest because, by the end of that year, we [students] were probably close to forty. And now that I work with recruitment, and I can see that more than 60% of students in Grand Island and other communities here in central Nebraska are now Latinos or other cultures. But back then, obviously we weren't that many. We experienced a lot of discrimination and racism and... I think that the school district wasn't ready for us, and I felt that they just wanted us to graduate so that they didn't have to deal with us anymore. We were not on a path to go to college or anything like that, and it wasn't until my last semester when my English as a Second Language teacher sat with me and she cried and said, "You can do better for yourself". At that time, I didn't even believe in myself, and this lady believed in me, and she talked to me about going to community college, and I did, and I finished my Associates Degree for a community college in Columbus [Nebraska] and instead of two years, it was three years.

[26:20]

I didn't know being first generation, low income, and at that time, I didn't have any documentation to even apply for any financial aid, any grants, or anything like that... It was very challenging. It was hard. But I do remember, at the beginning of the semester, my teacher sent me a check for 300 bucks to pay for school. Now that I do this for a lot of students, it's just very, very personal for me. But she [ESL teacher] was the reason why I even considered going to

Coming to the Plains

college. And I graduated from the community college and went back to work with the school district in Grand Island. I was working for the migrant program, but I had my title, it was like this long [holds out hands] and I was doing outreach with the community, but I was also translating a lot of documents. Working there, I really developed a passion for becoming a teacher because I realized that through education you can do more, and you can have more, and the opportunities would just eventually... you create your own opportunities, so...

[27:45]

My second year working for the school district, I met Mr. Orlando Díaz. He was the first director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs. He approached me when I was taking my high school students to a college fair, and I think I was the only one that ended up coming to UNK [University of Nebraska at Kearney] out of the group of students. But he approached me, said, "Hey, I think you can do more. Here's my business card, and I have some money for you." And I'm thinking like, "No, you don't because there's no money for students like myself." At that time, too, I got married and my situation changed, too, with my immigration status. But I questioned that. I mean, it was kind of cool to see a Latino guy reaching out to you and recruiting you to come to UNK. And so, he's like, "Here's my business card, come and visit me." So, he recruited me. He gave me a scholarship, the one scholarship that I give to a lot of my students nowadays and once again, this other person believed in me and said, "I think you can do more, I think you can succeed." And I took the scholarship, and I left my family behind, and I came. Two and a half years later, I graduated with my bachelor's degree in Education.

[29:16]

My last year, my senior year, I was working for the College of Education, recruiting students. At that time, we applied for a grant through the No Child Left Behind Project with George Bush, back in the day. And we applied for a grant, and we got the grant, and it was 3.5 million dollars to spend in the next three years working with diverse community, providing them with resources. I was already working with a lot of these communities, recruiting bilingual educators. And so, my mentor, Dr. López, called me and say, "Hey, we got a grant. They want me to be the director," and I told him, "Yes?" "They will allow me to hire you as my assistant director." So, that's how I came to work at UNK, through that program. And I never got the opportunity to teach. I also realized that working for UNK would allow me to get a Master's Degree, and to fulfill more of my dream, which was more education.

[30:38]

WARREN: I just jotted a couple of questions down that you could ask. The first one that you can is: If you could pass on one message to young immigrants or children of immigrants, what would that be?

Coming to the Plains

GUZMÁN: Alright.

WARREN: And then, because obviously you have... that's a big part of your vocation. And then also, what final words would you want other people to know about your journey?

[31:03]

GARCÍA: What message would you like to give to young immigrants or children of immigrants?

GUZMÁN: Okay. I think the message that I give to my students that are struggling with immigration issues is: don't allow not having that piece of paper to determine what you're going to do with your lives. And don't allow their families' struggles to jeopardize their dreams. Everything is doable. It's going to be hard, but it's doable. You know? And I'm not telling you this because of my personal experience, but because of so many of my students' experiences. Those students that use those struggles as motivation to succeed will always succeed. That happened to me and it happens to a lot of my students. You cannot allow someone else to tell you, "No, you can't." The only person that can tell you that you can is you. So, that would be my advice. Don't stop, just keep going. I can probably say more, but I'll probably start bawling here in a minute.

[32:36]

GARCÍA: Any final words, or things that you would like to mention about your journey?

GUZMÁN: One of the things that I didn't share was that it took me ten years to finish my bachelor's degree because immigration, because a lot of the classes that I took at the community college didn't transfer because I never had a person tell me, "Juan you should do this and that," or help me navigate through my education. It was hard, and it's still hard. Going to school and taking classes while you're full time with family and everything is hard. It's not easy. I mean, if education was easy, we'd all be doctors and engineers right now, you know? And it's not. My determination... I was eager to do something. I didn't want to be part of the statistics. I didn't want to be working right next to my mom and dad in the meat packing plant. I wanted to make my dream a reality not only for me, but for my family, because of all the sacrifices that they made by coming to this country where sometimes we're not welcome. More than anything, I wanted to be able to provide for my family, give them a better future. And I think I have accomplished that. Le doy gracias a Dios por, for being here, for being in this position that allows me to help others, not only my students but my community as well. So, yeah.

[34:46]

Coming to the Plains

GUZMÁN: Did I tell you that I was a garbage man while I was going through college? Every summer, everybody's like, "Yeah! Summer!" And I was like, "Ohh, no!" Because my brother used to work for Mid-Nebraska Disposal, and I was the summer help. Four in the morning, I was riding in the back of the truck, or driving the truck. Every day, it was raining, or it was super-hot outside, or cold, or whatever. Every time I opened the toter [large garbage cart], and that smell, the garbage, came and hit my face, that was a reminder for me to come back to school and to finish because I knew what I was going to do for the rest of my life. But it was a very honest job with good benefits that allowed me to pay for my education. I always told my students that my best motivation, every time I opened the garbage can and that smell came and hit my face, I was like, "No, you need to go back and you need to finish." And, like I said, it took me ten years and I didn't give up, and gracias a Dios, I'm who I am because of those opportunities that I have created and because of my family that has always pushed me and because God has always put these angels in my life that I call advisors, professors. We all need people like that.

[36:24]