

University of Nebraska at Kearney

OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors

Coming to the Plains Oral Histories/ Llenando las Llanuras Historias Orales

Coming to the Plains/Llenando las Llanuras

5-11-2018

Gladys Godínez

Gladys Godínez

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/cttp-oh>



Part of the [Latin American History Commons](#), [Latin American Studies Commons](#), [Latina/o Studies Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

Coming to the Plains

Gladys Godínez, Interviewee
Leslie García, Interviewer
Andrea Farr, Videographer

Guatemala City, Guatemala

Interview date: 5/11/2018

GARCÍA: Okay, start with your full name, where you're from, and where you're living now.

GODÍNEZ: Gladys Godinez, Lexington. I currently live in Lexington, Nebraska, and I was born in Guatemala City, Guatemala.

GARCÍA: When I say the questions, if you could rephrase the question into your answer.

GODÍNEZ: Okay, I'll try.

GARCÍA: So, what country are you originally from?

GODÍNEZ: I'm originally from Guatemala. I was born in Guatemala City in 1982.

[0:29]

GARCÍA: Can you tell me when did you leave, and how old were you at that time?

GODÍNEZ: We left in 1989 and I was seven years old.

GARCÍA: Okay. Why did you leave your home country?

GODÍNEZ: At that time, my dad had decided to immigrate to California, so, as a family, we decided to follow our dad to be a family. So, we decided to move. And the reason why my dad decided to move, or immigrate to the United States is because, during the time that he was working as a truck driver, he was car-jacked? Hijacked? And they stole all of his essentials, and all the things that he was carrying at the time. Also, we had a lot of crime within the area, and the civil war also... we had a lot of crime due to the civil war that was happening in Guatemala.

[1:26]

GARCÍA: What was your experience coming here?

Coming to the Plains

GODÍNEZ: We had the blessing to be able to fly. We had a visa to come as tourists too. We moved to Inglewood, California, so we landed in LA. I didn't know where I was going. I just knew that I was going to go see my dad, because we hadn't seen him for a year or two, so all I could remember was the excitement of seeing my dad. I didn't know we were going forever. I didn't know we were staying in the United States, and I didn't know that I was moving from one country to another. I just knew that I was going to go see my dad.

[2:07]

GARCÍA: Who came with you when you immigrated, and who did you leave behind?

GODÍNEZ: We came as a family. When my dad immigrated by himself, he left us behind, to see if it was a worthwhile trip to make. So then, it was my mom, my grandma, and my two older brothers who moved or immigrated to the United States with me. And my immediate family was with us. We were very blessed to have that, but one thing that we did leave behind was all of our memories, so I don't have any childhood pictures. I don't have any baby pictures. I don't have any of that, and those are precious moments that we can't bring back.

GARCÍA: What was your first impression of the United States? And did you expect anything from it?

[2:58]

GODÍNEZ: At that time, I didn't have any expectations because I wanted to see my dad. In Inglewood, California, there's a high rate of Latinos. So, we could speak Spanish wherever we went. The only difference was in the school system. I had to learn English. And I had a really nice ESL [English as a Second Language] teacher, in second grade, and she was very nice to me. I was able to learn, within a year or two, the English language. I don't think as a seven-year-old I had any expectations other than being with my family and learning what I had to learn when I'm here.

GARCÍA: What were some of the differences or similarities you noticed within the culture here and in your hometown?

GODÍNEZ: So, here in Lexington?

GARCÍA: In the United States.

[3:50]

Coming to the Plains

GODÍNEZ: I think the differences in culture is the family dynamic. We had family in Guatemala, and we had different cousins, aunts, and they always were there with us. Here, it was difficult because we didn't have family when we initially moved to Inglewood, California. Once we moved to Lexington, it seemed as though my mom's side of the family decided to move along with us, so we have a large part of our family here in Lexington.

GARCÍA: Can you tell me about your move from California to Nebraska, and why you moved here?

[4:24]

GODÍNEZ: I always recall the riots in LA and that's our story. My story of why we moved to Nebraska is that, during the riots, my aunt's husband or boyfriend at that time, he got hit. His windows were broken in the car, and he had to be hospitalized due to the riots. So due to the high crime rate, again, in Inglewood, California we decided to move to Lexington. And Lexington, at that time, had IBP, the meat packing plant. Tyson bought that meat packing plant out. One of the main reasons was for our safety. So, again, my dad decided to move to Lexington. He came in a car with my older brother, Cesar, and then, after that, we followed as a family. At that time, I had my little sister, Rosangela, and we came here on the train, for our first time.

GARCÍA: What are some differences you saw from California to Nebraska?

[5:27]

GODÍNEZ: In California, there was a high rate of Latinos there already, so speaking Spanish was not an issue. Going to the store and speaking Spanish was not an issue. Once we moved to Lexington, we were probably one of the first large waves that started coming because of IBP. That was a big culture shock, both for us and Lexington. Our experience going to the store in Inglewood, California was that my parents could pay and speak in Spanish to the cashier. Here, it was way different. And the reception of our community wasn't great at the time. The same example going to the supermarket or going to the store - the same cashiers would yell at my parents because they thought that they couldn't understand...They didn't speak Spanish, so, instead of speaking slower, they would yell at my parents. That was hard for me to understand, coming and respecting my parents as adults, and being a young immigrant, being a young child, and seeing a cashier yelling at my parents because they didn't speak the language.

GARCÍA: How have you been treated differently, or your parents, from when you were young up to now?

[6:49]

Coming to the Plains

GODÍNEZ: I think Lexington has grown. I think there's a difference at this moment, a kind of acknowledgement that Latinos are not just here and then leaving, or here to commit crimes and then leave. We're not as transitional as we were before. We've made homes out of our homes here in Lexington. My parents have lived here for a very long time; they like it. They like knowing where they're at. They like Tyson. Tyson has given us the opportunity to grow, educate ourselves, and then complete our degrees. So, I think Lexington has grown. I also think we can do better as a community; I think our leadership needs to reflect our community a little bit more. And I would love to be a part of that change in the future. If we want to change, we have to be part of that change, so I hope to be someone to be able to answer some of those questions; or have the ability to facilitate the conversations, those hard conversations between cultures. I don't think that's happening currently in Lex. So, once we're open to those communications, those conversations, then, Lexington will then reflect our community.

GARCÍA: Could you talk about your work experience and your education and work here in Nebraska?

[8:11]

GODÍNEZ: Sure. I went to UNK [University of Nebraska at Kearney], I'm a grad. I graduated in political science, and then literature as a minor. And then after that, I worked in the human services field. I worked from child protective services to domestic violence survivors, to higher education. I was a case manager for dislocated workers, people that were laid off due to employment. I had to help them re-train and then be able to find them either employment or a career that they planned to choose after they were laid off. All of my work has been human services in the past. Currently, I'm starting a small non-profit, and I'm also trying to become a community organizer within the state of Nebraska to be able to help advocate and empower a lot of our Latino friends and families that need representation within our state.

GARCÍA: Could you state the people in your family, your parents, and then your siblings, and then what they do?

[9:18]

GODÍNEZ: Sure, I hope they feel comfortable with that. I think they should... Okay. My parents... currently, my dad is retired. He worked at Tyson. I don't know exactly how many years, but it was a long time. My mom currently, semi-retired, she is currently working also at Tyson, but she always tells me, "Next year, I'll retire." So, we'll see when she retires. My older brother, he is a business owner. His name is Carlos, and he owns Nick's Gyros in Kearney. So that's a big landmark in Kearney. And then Cesar, he is a project engineer at JD Construction, which is out of Omaha. And then myself, I am currently a community organizer within the state

Coming to the Plains

of Nebraska. And Rosangela, she is currently an attorney for the ACLU of Nebraska. And then our youngest is Johnathan and he is currently at UW [University of Wisconsin] at Madison, he's studying psychology.

GARCÍA: How do you think your life would have differed if you would have grown up in your home country?

[10:27]

GODÍNEZ: I see it two ways. Sometimes I think, okay, "What would happen to me if I was in Guatemala now?" and I also think, "What would happen to me if I was in Inglewood, California now?" Those are two big moves that we had in our lifetime. So, in Guatemala, I don't know. I 100% don't know how my life would be. I can imagine it being, maybe, with fear, at times, because we still have a high crime rate in Guatemala City, but I also can imagine our family being so driven that I would still have continued my education if I had the opportunity to. We had to pay for our education in Guatemala, so I'm not sure if we had the money to be able to pay for all three, especially because I was the girl. So, chances are that the boys would have gotten to go to school and not me. I would have been a stay-at-home house cleaner or whatnot.

[11:20]

And then I think about Inglewood, California, and the rate that we were going...In middle school we were getting pregnant, and/or we were involved in gangs. I can't tell you much. I wasn't pregnant in middle school here, but I can tell you that it was a little different here, just due to the fact that when we came to Lexington, we didn't have a group. I know that, once we came to Lexington, we had to find our little groups, our niche, and, in that way we were involved with gangs. And I'm not saying that I was part of a gang. I'm saying that I hung out with gang members, and I understand why we develop gangs. It's because we didn't feel part of the community and we definitely heard a lot of negativity against our Latino people. So, we just decided to make our own groups and develop our self-esteem that way. So, I think it would be different because, potentially, I would have been pregnant in high school, and maybe not followed my educational path. I would hope that that would not be the case, but we never know. I'm grateful that my parents moved me from Guatemala to Inglewood, and I'm grateful that they decided to move us from Inglewood to Lexington, Nebraska.

GARCÍA: You kind of touched on it, but how do you think it would be different if you were the opposite gender?

[12:39]

Coming to the Plains

GODÍNEZ: I think I would get a lot of opportunities. And I'm going to say it throughout, within my household, we were very much the Latino household. You know, the women serve, the women cook, the men sit, drink, and/or do whatever they're doing, watching the game or whatever. I was very anti-that and my brothers can tell you that, so I definitely fought my household dynamic. And then once I was out of the house and in high school or college, I decided to be more active. I was at UNK with the Hispanic Student Association. We founded the Cultural Unity Conference, and in that conference, I can tell you, I sat with about eight men at the same table and talked to the chancellor, and I was the only woman during that time. So, it was... I'm going to say, as a woman, it was harder because I felt that I wasn't respected and/or treated equally. But, at the same time, I feel that, as a woman, due to the fact that I did what I have done, other women have had opportunities to do what I have done.

GARCÍA: What changes in your lifestyle or culture have you picked up on or noticed, when you immigrated to two places?

[14:03]

GODÍNEZ: I think the family dynamic still stays the same. We're very close. We try to be together during Christmas. We try to do something together during Thanksgiving. But Thanksgiving we never had in Guatemala, so I think our biggest one was Christmas in Guatemala, and New Year's. Due to the gifts, and due to the fireworks, and it was a community event. We had those. But once we came here, I think Thanksgiving became a big one in our family. We used to go to a church here in town because we didn't know what Thanksgiving was; and we didn't have the money to be able to afford to eat turkey, and all of the other stuff. So, we went to a church, and they fed us. And then, throughout the years, I became a volunteer for the church. Then I could start helping feeding people. And then, it also became a sort of a tradition. Every Thanksgiving, myself and our younger siblings, we always go out somewhere and volunteer for Thanksgiving. We come up with new traditions. I married my husband. His name is Chris, and he's African American, our kids are mixed, Guatemalan and African American. And we also do a lot of stuff that Chris and his family do.

GARCÍA: What are your hopes for yourself and/or your family in the future?

[15:27]

GODÍNEZ: I hope that in Lexington... because when we make change, we try to go small and then go big...I hope that in Lexington, we can see the reflection in our administrations, both school, city, and county to be able to reflect our Latino leaders within our community. I hope that my daughter grows up without racism within the school system. Because we have had experiences like that here in Lexington. And then, I hope that...we just get treated equally; you

Coming to the Plains

know. It's not side-eye, it's not speaking louder to us, it's not the idea that we're not educated. I think Lexington, at this moment, is coming to a realization that a lot of our students are coming back, graduating, and are educated, and they're somewhat surprised when they meet us. Where they're like, "Oh, you speak well!" you know, and we're like "Well, I went to school", "I went to... so, I'm able to speak well." It would be nice for our community to reflect and then sit back and change with us. Because we have a lot to give to our community.

[pause]

GARCÍA: Have you been back to your home country or to California?

[16:50]

GODÍNEZ: No, I haven't. And the reason why is because I haven't had the chance to. When we came, the immigration system was just a mess. But the point is that I was not able to, and I'm not able to travel back to Guatemala. I was considered DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] for a long time, because of the fact that I didn't choose to file when I got married to my husband. When I was fifteen, I was told that I should get married to a citizen so then I could become a citizen, and that was their way of thinking that that's the only way that we can become citizens. When President Obama put DACA in, it gave us a little more power, right? We didn't have to get married to a citizen to be part of the community or be part of our country. After, I don't know...today's our anniversary. We're nine years in, Chris and I, probably after eight years, and my sister being an immigration attorney, I finally filed paperwork so that I could become a legal, permanent resident, and then eventually be a citizen. But it was due to both being stubborn as a feminist and being like, "I don't need to be married to be somebody," but also the fact that I didn't want my husband to think that I was marrying him just due to my immigration status.

[18:16]

GARCÍA: I think that's all the questions, but I wanted to say do you have any advice or suggestions or just a comment you want to say about what you do, what you plan to do...?

GODÍNEZ: I think, for our young kids, we have so many young kids within our school systems; I would love for them to understand and know that they're worth something. The rhetoric at this moment, in the United States, is scary. But, if our Latino friends or our immigrant friends regardless of race understand that they're welcomed, that they belong, and are part of our community, if the state of Nebraska can say that? That would be great.

GARCÍA: I think that's it.

Coming to the Plains

GODINEZ: Okay. Thanks!

[19:29]