

Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

Interview with Alvaro Cruz

October 23, 2005

Interviewer Miguel Giner

Miguel: What is your name?

Alvaro: My name is Alvaro Antonio Cruz.

Miguel: What is your date of birth?

Alvaro: February 25, 1967

Miguel: Where were you born at?

Alvaro: I was born in Managua, Nicaragua.

Miguel: And what is your race or ethnic group?

Alvaro: I am Hispanic.

Miguel: How many brothers and sisters do you have and what are their ages?

Alvaro: I am the oldest of five. Two brothers and two sisters. 37, 35, 32, and 30.

Miguel: Are your parents still alive?

Alvaro: Yes, they are still alive. They live here in the United States.

Miguel: Among your family members, who is still living in your native country?

Alvaro: All of them. Practically we are the only ones here in the United States.

Miguel: Are you talking about your parents and siblings?

Alvaro: Yes. My closest family members, my parents and siblings, they are all here.

Miguel: But you still have close relatives back in Nicaragua?

Alvaro: Yes, uncles, cousins, grandparents, all of them.

Miguel: When you lived in your country, what was your occupation?

Alvaro: I was a student.

Miguel: What did you study?

Alvaro: Elementary, secondary, and was getting ready for college.

Miguel: At what age did you immigrate to the United States?

Alvaro: At 17.

Miguel: What language did they speak in your family when you were little?

Alvaro: Only Spanish.

Miguel: Did you ever get to work while you lived in Nicaragua.

Alvaro: Never. Only at home.

Liberal Memorial Library received an \$8,000 Kansas Humanities Grant to record the immigration stories of immigrants to Southwest Kansas. The Grant titled "Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community" will record and preserve the stories of 40 individuals and/or families who immigrated to Southwest Kansas from a foreign country.

The grant dollars from the Kansas Humanities Council allowed the library to record the interviews with both video and audio equipment and disseminate the information obtained during the interviews through our website and DVD recordings. Preserving the stories of immigrants to Southwest Kansas is important for many reasons, and if we do not begin to record them soon, the stories will be lost as families move on or individuals pass away.

Miguel: Can you tell me about your living conditions in your native country before you immigrated to the United States?

Alvaro: What I remember is that we were a middle class family, and the only one who worked in the household was my father. Usually in my country we tried to go to school until we turn 23 which is when we graduate from college. After that we move out of the house to begin our new life.

Miguel: What did your father do?

Alvaro: He was a technician in aviation.

Miguel: Anything else you would like to add about your living conditions in Nicaragua?

Alvaro: What I remember is that we lived well. A lot of love from both families. An easy life.

Miguel: What is your religion?

Alvaro: Catholic.

Miguel: When you lived in your country, were you ever subjected to harassment or physical or mental abuse by the authorities?

Alvaro: Since the Sandinistas took power I felt harassed and pressured due to the changes. The torture existed mentally. How can I say, and the lack of food because at my age I had to wait for four hours for four pounds of rice, three hours waiting for two pounds of meat. That was the mental torture. Another mental torture that we had was that the government would harass us to participate in their actions under the Sandinista government. So that created a resentment towards them. They used that a lot, especially with young people to brainwash them, to get them to participate with them.

Miguel: You lived in Nicaragua before and after the Sandinista Revolution?

Alvaro: Exactly.

Miguel: What was life like before the Sandinista Revolution?

Alvaro: Very easy. I never thought that once the Sandinistas won the revolution things would change for the worse. We lived better off under the government of Somoza.

Miguel: Let's talk a little bit about your experience as an immigrant. How did you first hear? What do you remember the very first time about the United States, or what was your first experience?

Alvaro: Since I was very young my father was trained by the Americans, the North Americans. My father came to the United States since I was very little even before I was born and after I was born. He came in 1966 and 1967 and 1969, so I heard since I was very young about San Antonio, Texas.

Miguel: Is that where your father was trained?

Alvaro: He was trained as a technician in aviation through the government of the United States and the government of Nicaragua.

Miguel: What motivated you to move to Southwest Kansas?

Alvaro: Life is easier, more peaceful, work, opportunities. When you learn the language there are many opportunities.

Miguel: Do you remember when you immigrated to the United States, do you remember that trip?

Alvaro: It is something that I will never forget.

Miguel: Why? Tell me a little bit more about that trip when you knew you were immigrating definitely to the United States.

Alvaro: First, the decision was made by my father. Life in Nicaragua was not appropriate for us. What they decided was to come to the United States looking for a better life, and because I was a minor I had to obey my parents. I lived in Mexico for three months alone. Like we say in Nicaragua, after never

being away from my mother's skirts, I switched to be from a child to a grownup, and it was a great experience. I am not going to say that I was not afraid. I did not know where I was going. Practically, I didn't know the culture or what was expected of me in this country. After many years of trying to obtain a visa from the American Embassy in Nicaragua, they kept denying it and denying it, but I had the option to look for a new life, and we took our chances, and our chances were to come to this country illegally.

Miguel: Through Mexico?

Alvaro: That was the only way because swimming was a long way.

Miguel: Anything else in particular that you remember about that immigration trip or any memory?

Alvaro: The only memory that I have was that Mexicans treated me much better than the Americans. They were more interested in learning how I was or about the culture in my country even though in both countries we speak Spanish. I noticed that they had that curiosity. When I came I felt a bit apart. I felt lonely. My experience has been that in any Hispanic country where I go they are going to treat me better than here.

Miguel: How did you find your first job in the United States?

Alvaro: Out of need. When I came to the United States, I saw the need that my mother was needing support, and then I worried about finding a job. I went to school, and right after school I went to work. From 3:00PM to 11:00PM sometimes, and I did my homework from 11:00PM to 1:00AM sometimes.

Miguel: Do you remember what was your first job in this country?

Alvaro: I participated at a nursing home, and I was in charge of cleaning the yard. That is what I did. That was my first job. I didn't like it because I have always been an ambitious person. I have always liked the medical field, but when I came and I saw the need and when you see dollars, that gives you another kind of ambition more towards money. I liked the job. I did well, but because I was very young they sent me back to school, and I appreciated that up to this date.

Miguel: Where was that? Where did you live when that happened?

Alvaro: In California. Being at school I started looking for work, and thank God I found a job washing cars, and that helped me for two years, and I learned. I learned a lot about American society and also about business.

Miguel: When you immigrated to the United States, how did your family find housing for the first time?

Alvaro: Once we were all here, we saw the need of being apart, so we went out looking and sometimes you find discrimination because we are Hispanics, and they think we are going to be destructive. That is the kind of stereotype that they give us, but that did not stop us. We moved on. Whoever takes no for an answer, it is because he has no ambition, but nothing should stop us.

Miguel: What have been some of the most difficult adjustments that you had to make living in this society?

Alvaro: The biggest adjustment is to learn the language. Not only the interest that you put on it, but also not to pay attention to the reaction of the Americans when you try to speak it. At first, you have an accent, and they refuse to understand, and if you give up you get depressed about that. I have always thought that whether you speak it right or not you are doing what you can to get ahead.

Miguel: What has been your experience with the Immigration authorities?

Alvaro: Very bad. That has been one of the worst things that I can say about the American government. First, because there are people that do not have the background or the experience to treat people. They treat us like animals. Even when there are laws to protect animals, they treat animals better than people. It has been a bad experience.

Miguel: What has been your experience with teachers and the schools?

Alvaro: I cannot complain about that. During my period of middle school I had very good teachers who supported me and helped me, teachers that wanted to show me the good way, and I thank them for that.

Miguel: As far as the police and law enforcement, what has been your experience?

Alvaro: I have been a very calm person, and I think that has a lot to do with it. If I don't look for trouble, I don't find trouble. The police have never affected me in any way. There have been a few cases lately that I have felt discriminated and the states around here, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Texas. I'm going to tell you a story, a short story about what happened to me about a year and a half ago. We are hard working people. We come here looking for opportunities. My wife and I went to purchase a car to Amarillo, Texas. We saw it. We liked it, but did not make a decision. We came back to Liberal and two days later we decided that we wanted it. We called the bank, we talked to the people we needed to talk to, and we decided to go pick up the car, and I went myself. On the way back, the police stopped me in Goodwell, Oklahoma, because I had the fog lights on. They stopped me for forty-five minutes looking for drugs, anything, but didn't find anything, and told me I could leave. But before they told me how I did to have such a car that practically they were telling me that that car was too much for me. The education my parents gave me made me to stay quiet, but what he said was discrimination because the policeman had no right to ask that kind of question. The fact that I have a good car, and he sees me driving a new car does not mean that I am stealing or selling. The only thing I do is work hard in this country. I respect the laws and the same way I respect others, I want them to respect me. I think it was because of the education my parents gave me that kept me from saying something. The saddest part was that there were five policeman, and three of them were Hispanics; nobody said anything. But what happens when you bring this to the attention of higher authorities, they don't believe you. The police told me that I didn't deserve to drive such a car because I am a Hispanic, and he was not respecting me.

Miguel: That speaks very poorly of that police department and that officer.

Alvaro: It does about the officer even over the fact that he was white. But that is how they stereotype us. It is true that there is bad people everywhere, the same where there are Hispanics or Americans, but the fact that I was telling them what I do, where I work, and the reason why my license tag was different, they checked my license tag. Everything was fine. They checked my driver's license. It was all fine. Even then, he made that comment. I didn't know how to react or respond. If I had said something, that probably could have been the reason to be arrested, and then they would be saying that we are bad people, that we do not respect, but when we show respect, they commit abuse. Honestly, I felt like crying. I was angry. I never felt so humiliated like that day, but what are you going to do?

Miguel: The next question is related to this issue, if you ever suffered from racism or have you ever experienced racism from the Americans towards you.

Alvaro: I came to learn racism in this country. I didn't know racism in my country. My country is very diverse. Along the coast of the Atlantic, there is black people, and they speak English. There are also Mizquitos who are native Indians, and they don't speak Spanish. They speak Mizquito. We have peasants from different races. It is a very diverse country, and I never had the experience, I never saw, and I was never taught, in seventeen years before I came, any racism until I came here. I have been making the stoplight and people look at me that I have a better car or that I am dressed better than them, and they spit on my car. They have scratched my car. Literally they have tried to run me out. At first, I didn't understand because it was never taught to me. Racism is something ugly. I have two children, one two years old, and when a person from a different race or color comes and they talk to my child, I encourage him to talk to them so that this doesn't happen again and he doesn't go through that experience. To me, racism has existed since I came here.

Miguel: During the time you have been in the United States, have you had the opportunity to go back to your native country?

Alvaro: Immigration keeps me in suspense, expecting a dream that is never going to happen. The dream about

getting the papers fixed. Immigration tells me that I cannot go back. If I go back, I lose all my rights.

Miguel: How long have you been in that situation?

Alvaro: For twenty-two years.

Miguel: So you cannot leave the country? Why has your case not been resolved?

Alvaro: I think the idea for Immigration is that we get tired, that we will get tired one day, that we miss our country very greatly and leave. I have spent more money on Immigration proceedings than in taxes since I have been here. I put an application. When we came I was minor and the whole family applied. After one year of not getting any answers, we went to Immigration, and they told me that I had been excluded from my family because I turned eighteen. But they never took the time to say we are going to send you a letter explaining why I was not on the same application as my parents. So what happened then? We went to Immigration and they said that I was no longer on the application because I turned eighteen and they said I needed to reapply. We don't come here with much money. After all the expenses, and especially coming from a large family, and when I turned eighteen I had to reapply and pay money again, do the paperwork again. I went to school four years. I missed school mostly because of appointments with Immigration. Otherwise I would not have missed any school. I was a good student. I have shown to the US government and to the American society that I am a good person. I don't get in trouble with police. I try to help even to the same Americans, but I don't understand. I was a straight A student with a little bit of English. I graduated with honors. One of the eleven best students of eleventh grade. Principal honor roll the four years of school. After I graduated with honors, I went to apply for a scholarship, and they told me that they could not give me a scholarship because I was not from here. They told me that if they gave me a scholarship to study, later I will leave and go back to my country. So why try to get ahead if we are not going to have the opportunity.

Miguel: Why Immigration does not resolve your case?

Alvaro: Because they don't want to.

Miguel: So after all these years, you have not been back to Nicaragua?

Alvaro: If not, because of technology that you can communicate through the internet, I would not know how things were in my country. It is difficult. I think that the biggest pain is the one that Immigration gives you. Because of Immigration, you cannot sleep, you have to spend money because of Immigration, and they don't resolve your case. They give you an expectation that they are never going to fulfill.

Miguel: What do they tell you when you go?

Alvaro: If they talk to you, if they want to talk to you, in my experience has been very bad. Since the very first person who puts me in line, if you want to ask a question, they answer that they don't know, so why do they have those people there if they don't know. That is the kind of respect that we get. Immigration is making lawyers rich. Just giving people hope on something that is never going to happen. A lot of people here in the United States have died hoping. Many others have come and have gone waiting for that to happen. Many people who have been waiting have lost their parents and instead they prefer to leave. They want to see them one more time, and they have to spend more money to return knowing that Immigration will never decide on their cases. If at least they would issue work permits for them to stay here and work.

Miguel: Do you keep in contact with people in your native country?

Alvaro: Yes. In some ways I do.

Miguel: Do you send money to Nicaragua?

Alvaro: Yes, my grandparents are sick, and they are the only reason I send money to Nicaragua.

Miguel: Do you think that sometime in the future you will return to your native country?

Alvaro: It is my country. I would go back, of course.

Miguel: What have been the most difficult adjustments that you made living in the American society?

Alvaro: The most difficult aspect has been to understand their culture. It is very different from the Hispanic culture. We as Hispanics are more lovable, and we like other people learning about our culture and also about learning English because it is not easy, especially when you feel they set you apart. In order to learn English well, you have to relate to others, and I think that my ambition and the kind of jobs that I had helped me to learn English.

Miguel: Do you feel more safe or less safe in this country?

Alvaro: It is a question difficult to answer, but I chose it for the following reason. I feel safe because most of the people follow the law. But how can you follow the law when like for example if they don't give people the right to drive or they deny them the right to have an ID when they are stopped by police, how do they feel? They are going to feel afraid. So when they feel afraid, they don't feel safe. That is why I chose this question. It is not that people are afraid. We are afraid because we don't have the opportunity to move on. There are a lot of good people. That is why they came. That is the reason why we are the way we are.

Miguel: If you had the opportunity to talk to someone one thing to immigrate to the United States, what advice would you give them?

Alvaro: To come over. The fact that Immigration tells us that they are not going to give us papers is not going to destroy our hope and expectations to come to work, that doesn't mean anything. We always will find a way to work, one way or another. Immigration only takes our hopes away, and if they take one step, we take three. But our hopes will remain. As long as we can dream, we will continue coming.

Miguel: As an immigrant living in the United States, what do you consider as your greatest challenges?

Alvaro: My greatest challenge is being able to vote. It is obvious that we will not be a minority in this country very soon. Maybe that is the fear that the Americans have. Being able to vote means a lot. It is a challenge. Once we can fulfill that challenge as a majority, we are not going to discriminate anyone. We will give opportunity to everyone. The only thing we want is to face the challenge of being able to vote and decide by ourselves what we want. Be equals which is what we want. We will be a majority, and we will not say that we are the ones in command. We will say that we are all equal. That is our challenge.

Miguel: Do you consider that American society has become more hospitable or less hospitable?

Alvaro: Since the September 11th, they have become less hospitable. I don't see why. We are immigrants that come to work. As Hispanics, we don't make any harm, but the government attacks us. Why, I can't tell. Hispanics are the ones who most help this country. We don't bring money, but we make money. We are the group that most represents this country. Look at the Americans. When they go to a restaurant, and I know that you have noticed this, what do they eat? Salad. Who picks it up? Hispanics. I lived in California sixteen years. I never saw an American, not even driving a tractor. I never saw an American bending over in the fields, but we are the ones they attack. Why? A Chinese comes, and they don't say nothing about Chinese. The Chinese also enter illegally. Who are the ones who come legally? People from the Middle East. People from the Middle East, in one year they have their residency only because they bring money. ! And who are the ones who attack this country? The ones from the Middle East. But us who only want to come and go see our families, work and do what we have to do and respect the law, they treat us like old rags. I don't think that is fair.

Miguel: So you are a native from Nicaragua?

Alvaro: By the grace of God.

Miguel: Let me ask you another question. Do you consider yourself American, Nicaraguan, or both?

Alvaro: I'm Nicaraguan, but my attitude is very Americanized. In Nicaragua, I didn't do anything other than going to school. When I came to the United States, we tried to learn the culture, the laws, and everything. After spending here another seventeen years, when you turn eighteen you get to learn more. I dress like an American. I eat a lot of American foods. There are so many things that I can

mention, how I have become Americanized. But my heart always will be at the place I was born. I will always be a Nicaraguan with Americanized attitudes.

Miguel: Is there anything else you would like to mention?

Alvaro: I would like to see this for the purpose of helping other people. The people who discriminate against us to get us to know better. That will help them to make better laws rather than bad laws. It is true that we are not only white doves, but sometimes we have that attitude because we live in a world that discriminates us. We live in a world that challenges us. We feel harassed. If we were given the opportunity to be here, probably we would have a better life here in the United States. There is many people that do bad things because they feel harassed in their minds. Let me give you an example. If you are an American, I feel harassed by the American laws, but if you tell me something, just a little thing, I will attack you because that is the only way you are giving me to express myself, and that can take us to act violent physically and mentally. Mentally because we already have it because of all the harassment and everything that we are deprived. So what happens then? Since the very moment that you tell me something, I'm already acting defensive, whatever it takes which is not a good way of doing things. I am defending myself. I have the right to defend myself, but because you are an American, the only thing you have to do is go to the police and tell that this Hispanic boy or Mexican, because we are all considered Mexicans, attacked me.

Miguel: They consider all the Hispanics as Mexicans

Alvaro: If I am Filipino, if I am Hindu from India, or if I'm Korean or Mexican or Puerto Rican or Dominican, why, because they don't know me.

Miguel: They think that they all are Mexicans.

Alvaro: "Because of people like you." Like me what? "Where are you from?" I'm from here because I can't go anywhere else.