

# Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

## Interview with Arturo and Dora Ponce

March 15, 2005

Interviewer Miguel Giner

*Miguel: What's your name?*

Arturo: Arturo Ponce.

*Miguel: And you are?*

Dora: Dora Ponce.

*Miguel: Arturo, what is your date of birth?*

Arturo: 03-28-69.

*Miguel: And you?*

Dora: 05-12-65.

*Miguel: And your place of birth*

Arturo: Chihuahua, Chihuahua

Dora: Ignacio, Zaragoza, Chihuahua, Mexico

*Miguel: What is your race or ethnicity, Arturo*

Arturo: I come from Mexico

*Miguel: Or Hispanic*

Arturo: Yes, Hispanic

*Miguel: And you Dora*

Dora: Hispanic. I am Mexican.

*Miguel: Hispanic*

Dora: Yes, Hispanic.

*Miguel: Arturo, how many brothers and sisters do you have and what are their ages?*

Arturo: We come from family of four brothers, two sister, and two brothers and then myself. Older sister, she died four years ago. I am the second in the family. I am 45.

*Miguel: You are 45*

Arturo: Yes, and the third is Mario Ponce. He is 43

*Miguel: He is 43*

Arturo: He is 43. And my sister, she is 44

*Miguel: So there is a total of four siblings*

Arturo: Four

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: Two brothers and two sisters. All right, Dora*

Dora: Yes, in my family we was six brothers, and I have five brothers and myself.

*Miguel: The other is you, five brothers and you*

Dora: Yes. And I have four brothers older than me. His name is Ricardo. He is 46 years. Arturo is 45. Roberto is 43. Ramiro is 42. Myself, 39. Oh, my gosh. And my little brother is Manuel. He is 36, 33, sorry.

*Miguel: Arturo, are your parents still alive?*

Arturo: Yes. Both

*Miguel: Both of them*

Arturo: Yes

*Miguel: And you Dora?*

Dora: Yes, both still alive.

*Miguel: Arturo, who among your family continues to live in your homeland? Who in your family lives still in Mexico?*

Arturo: Well, my parents, my mom and my daddy. Yes, only them. Because here in the USA is my older two brothers. One is living in Denver, and my sister, she is living in El Paso, Texas.

*Miguel: That's only parents in Mexico.*

Arturo: Only my parents. And myself here in Southwest Kansas.

*Miguel: What about your family?*

Dora: Okay, I have two brothers living in Chihuahua. My parents live in El Paso, and three brothers are in El Paso, and myself here in Southwest Kansas

*Miguel: Okay. Arturo, when you lived in your country, what was your occupation? What did you do?*

Arturo: Well, basically I graduated from the University of Mexico. I don't have the degree, but I finished this in chemistry. After that I was working a little bit with the fish department (Department of Fishing). After that I started my own business making a little factory.

*Miguel: Your own business?*

Arturo: Yes.

*Miguel: And you got a degree from the University in...*

Arturo: Chemistry.

*Miguel: Chemistry. Dora, what was your occupation in Mexico before you came?*

Dora: Well, in Mexico I studied account and secretary, so I was working there. I was a secretary over there working with account.

*Miguel: How long did you work in that capacity, Arturo? How long did you run your business?*

Arturo: I graduated in 1983, and I started with the fish department in 1984. Four years owning my own business, 1988 we come, supposed to be for vacation, but we stayed.

*Miguel: Did you say you worked in Mexico?*

Dora: Yes

*Miguel: How long did you work?*

Dora: It was around six years

*Miguel: Arturo, what was your weekly salary before you came?*

Arturo: Good question

*Miguel: Or like you can give us an average day or monthly*

Arturo: Well, it is hard because I am running my own business. It is hard to say.

*Miguel: Can you say that you had a good income*

Arturo: Yes, absolutely. Pretty good

*Miguel: All right. What about you, Dora? Do you remember*

Dora: I don't remember what was my income, but not was bad, it was very good.

*Miguel: Was good?*

Dora: Was good, yes, was good

*Miguel: What were your living conditions like in your country, Arturo? What was your life like before you came?*

Arturo: Well, I think it is similar like here. We come from similar living conditions.

*Miguel: Similar. What about you, Dora*

Dora: Was same. Regularly in Mexico when you have a job, and in my case especially, my income was not low, was little high, because in the company that I was working was international business. They give good salary when I was working there, but my life in Mexico was good, so I come from the poor people but the way we were raised we started working when we was a child. I remember I was doing all the things, home keeper, when I was five or six years old because my parents was working and all my family was working together. When we was teenagers and more adults, all the family was working, so all the incomes from everybody was a good income in my home, so too different to other people we were good in Mexico. Here is more easy because here the money is more...there are no disparities, but in Mexico is a little more different. It was good over there.

*Miguel: You had six brothers, seven incomes in the same house.*

Dora: Yes, seven incomes in the same house, so it was good. Not was bad.

*Miguel: I see. Arturo, what is your religion.*

Arturo: Catholic

*Miguel: Catholic. What about you, Dora*

Dora: Catholic

*Miguel: Same thing?*

Dora: Yes

*Miguel: Okay. Arturo, when you lived in your country, were you ever harassed or physically or mentally abused, tortured, persecuted by the authorities, something like that? Were you ever harassed by the authorities or in jail or tortured?*

Arturo: No, basically

*Miguel: What about you?*

Dora: No

*Miguel: You didn't have that, any of that*

Dora: No

*Miguel: All right. Okay. Let's get to the next set of questions, the immigrant experience. Arturo, how did you first learn about the United States?*

Arturo: Well, basically, I guess a very good education in Mexico. But you say USA, right?

*Miguel: United States*

Arturo: The first time when I see American is because we are in America. Well, basically, I get very good education in Mexico. We started to know about the USA, also on the other part and people. And the other thing is very important is we are living very close to the border. On the border we see many many things from USA, on language, commerce, many many different things. When we are little we start to know about the USA.

*Miguel: Dora, how did you first learn about the United States*

Dora: Yes, how Arturo say was like tourists because we received some American tourists in Mexico so we have contact with them. I remember one occasion when I was working there and some American citizens came, and they told me, "I need to go to the bathroom." What do you say? Because at this moment I don't know English. I cannot have a conversation with the American citizen. I remember hearing your dictionary. He was telling me, "I need to do that." "Okay, okay, I understand, so okay."

*Miguel: How old were you when that happened?*

Dora: 18 years old. I started to work as a secretary at around 17 years.

*Miguel: What led you to move to Southwest Kansas, Arturo? Or, both of you, what brought you to move to Southwest Kansas?*

Arturo: Well, like I say earlier, basically we were supposed to come for vacation, fifteen days, with Roberto, Dora's brother. Supposedly we come for vacation and finally we stayed here for seventeen years.

*Miguel: When was that?*

Arturo: 1988

*Miguel: 1988, you came for a vacation for two weeks, and you ended up staying.*

Arturo: But the plan was not to stay here, is to come for vacation and visit family.

*Miguel: And you came because your brother lived here, Roberto*

Dora: Yes

*Miguel: All right. So that is what brought you to Southwest Kansas*

Arturo: Well, basically she bring us here

Dora: Yes. I remember it was a very funny story because when my brothers come to vacation they invite us to come and stay. We said no, we have few months married. He said he could leave his business. At the last moment Arturo said, "Okay, let's go," and we left our home without removing anything. We left our home like we would be back in fifteen days.

*Miguel: You were going back in fifteen days*

Dora: Yes, and after that we never come back again. I remember my parents they wanted to remove all the things from the home because Arturo said, "No, I don't want to go to the United States."

*Miguel: He didn't want to come*

Dora: But finally at the last moment he came

Arturo: We got the decision made about ten p.m., really late, the trip...

Dora: I think it was before one before they come. He go to pick up some of the clothes and said okay. And we never came back to pick up our clothes, personal items and we said "ok".

*Miguel: What else can you tell us about your immigration trip? What else do you remember from that trip the first time?*

Arturo: The first time?

*Miguel: When you first came to stay, to that vacation*

Arturo: Okay. Well, after the decision was made that night, the next day we decided (that it was) okay to come together. We came in two cars to the border. On the border we got all the permits for everyone because we passed right. We came in two cars, and it was really funny because it was very limited space in each car because we came, how many?

Dora: Eight persons

*Miguel: In one car? Or two cars?*

Dora: In two cars.

*Miguel: Eight people in two cars*

Arturo: And basically after we got the permits for everyone we stopped at different places. The way we come, we took the old 54 north, but on the Tularosa we were talking funny and the leader make a different one. We got lost.

*Miguel: You got lost?*

Arturo: Yes, this is really funny because we went to Ruidoso and I said, "Okay, we are taking very good vacation." We went to Ruidoso and after Ruidoso we again took the 54.

*Miguel: That's interesting. Let me ask you, how did you first find employment in this country? How did you get your first job?*

Arturo: Like I told you earlier, Roberto was working at Excel. He was working there for many years, I think six, seven, or eight, I don't know. He told us he got very good money every week. Basically by week he was making \$500, \$600, but you know what? He put a lot of overtime. He showed us the stub check, and we see \$500, \$600 a week. Anyway, he make all contacts, and he got jobs for us at Excel Corporation.

*Miguel: So, he was working for the packing plant in Dodge, that's where you went?*

Arturo: Exactly

*Miguel: And Roberto was working there already*

Arturo: Yes

*Miguel: Okay. Did you go to work when you came*

Dora: Yes, and I would like to say a little about that. Before when we came back the last time we came for some years for vacation, but during this vacation we were working here. We were in New Mexico harvesting red pepper, so it was around 1985, 1986, and this was monitored the papers because we proved we were working because before we got the legal papers we came a few times during those days, we wre qualified for the (Immigration) Amnesty. But for me especially was so hard because when you are working at a desk, it is so hard to come and harvest peppers and work in the big plants, so it was hard for me. I remember working twenty four hours because on the day was working in the plant in the nights in my dreams I was working so my mind and my body...

*Miguel: They were working around the clock*

Dora: Yes, so it was a nervous time. I remember my hands. I think it was a good experience because I know how people, myself and my family, was so hard, the job here in the United States.

*Miguel: How did you find your first house when you decided to stay? How did you find housing?*

Arturo: We arrived to Dodge City, and we were living with Roberto, and Roberto was living in the mobile

home. This mobile home had three bedrooms, two bathrooms. For a few months we were living together, I think about fourteen persons.

*Miguel: Fourteen people*

Arturo: Fourteen persons in the same house was really hard. We stayed in this house for about three months, and we see we are many people having very good income, and we decided to buy another mobile home. We made the separation about three or four months after we arrived at the United States. We were making together very good income.

*Miguel: What have been some of the most difficult adjustments that you had to make to live in the American society? What have been the biggest or the most difficult adjustments that you have made?*

Arturo: Well, okay, the first thing is to the adaptation to work here in the USA. Like Dora said, it is really hard when in Mexico you have to make decisions only using your brain. It is different when you use everything and sometimes working in one place doing the same job during eight hours repetitive motions is hard. I think it is the most hard thing to make adaptations to. After that I think is the adaptation to the society or the community, number one. The language was hard to me, understanding completely everything what the people say around me because we come from Mexico with a very good education, and you come over here and people are talking beside you, and you don't understand anything what they say. But this is the other thing, point number two, language.

*Miguel: And for you, Dora*

Dora: Yes, for me was the job, the language and friends. I felt so uncomfortable because I was with my family but no friends, in a new city because Chihuahua is very beautiful city, but we tried to adjust to this Southwest Kansas. We are here.

*Miguel: What has been your experience with the Immigration Service? When you had to go before Immigration, what was your experience?*

Arturo: Well, I think the first experience is not really good because when we proved that we had sometimes that we had to qualify for the agriculture program. We qualified for that, and Immigration of Kansas said, "No, you don't work here before or for this said period of time." "Yes, we do only one time," well, in my case is three times. But anyway, they said, "No you can't come to work on the farms, we don't believe you, you are lying." I said, "No, it is the truth. And why do you think I am lying? You need to prove that." It was really hard because we went together for the interview in Wichita and finally they said okay. But after some interviewing and pushing, please tell the truth. "What is the truth?" He want to give me the papers, it is fine.

*Miguel: So you were telling the truth and they were questioning*

Arturo: Yes, questioning, questioning

*Miguel: Do you want to add something*

Dora: Yes. It was so hard the first time when we had the interview with Immigration because I remember Immigration said that to everybody, so some of my brothers and Arturo, they said to another office my sister-in-law was at another office, and to everybody they told, "Aye, this guy told me the truth. So you tell me the truth. Which truth do you want?" "I told the truth." So they wanted us to tell, I don't know what they want. When they see everybody was saying the truth...

*Miguel: And their stories were consistent.*

Dora: Yes, and I remember the Immigration lady told me, "I will remember always your face because you never gave fibs." Well, sometimes you feel trustworthy. But after that we got the papers.

*Miguel: So she told you that you were not going to get your papers*

Arturo: Basically they tried to make confusion

*Miguel: Tried to confuse*

Dora: They did a lot of pressure because we was a big group. I remember one case this day to the interview was two guys there and the lady was, I think so, Immigration was doing the same thing when everybody came to apply. Those guys say well it is better that you tell me the truth because if you don't tell me the truth you will go directly to the jail and you will stay thirty years over there. And the wife was so scared, they said, "Well, it is not true." So they thrown all the papers and said not to come back. So I think they did that to all the people but that guy was not telling the true.

*Miguel: You were telling the truth*

Dora: Yes

Arturo: Yes, because the information was what right with everyone

Dora: Yes, and do you know and this year was a lot of problem.

*Miguel: All right. What has been your experience with teachers and school officials in this country? What can you tell us about the teachers and schools?*

Arturo: Well, very good, because when we was working at Excel in the mornings. Well, at Excel we was working on second shift, we started every day at 3:00 and we finished about 11:45. In the mornings we went to the Adult Learning Center to start to get English and then we have a teacher. This teacher was a very good person. They tried to help any way. And after we went to these classes, he pushed us to going to the college. In the college we received very good acceptance from the schools, teachers, but it is hard because we feel like a little mouse. It is hard because we are the only Hispanic persons in these groups.

*Miguel: In the college?*

Dora: Yes. Do you know it was so hard because regularly you know the basic English, so in the college it is a little more harder. We remember when we went over there, we finished, "Do you understand?" So, sometimes it was so hard, but after it started we tried to get a little more...at this moment my English is not very well, but I am trying to learn.

Arturo: But it is hard in this process because we were in the classes many times the teachers speak so fast. "You understand?" "No, you?" "Okay." That's fine, but after school we went to our house and studied the lesson again, and it is different for studies is easy for us and when it is time to test every test we get 100%.

*Miguel: You did pretty good. So you were going to school together*

Arturo: Yes

Dora: Yes

Arturo: All the aides said, "How you do that?" "We don't know."

*Miguel: What has been your experience with police and other law enforcement agencies in this country?*

Arturo: Very good. Very good. I don't have any problems usually. We try to follow the rules and only in the community around the community we try to follow every rule everywhere. We don't have any problems at this point.

Dora: Yes, I am same too, because I have seventeen years here and only I have one worry in all this time. How Arturo said, we try to follow the rules, and personally we never have any problems.

*Miguel: Is there any situations of racism on the part of Americans towards you? Have you ever experienced racism?*

Arturo: Well, I don't know if it is racism or discrimination but sometimes I feel this kind of situation when I was working in the Excel Corporation especially with the supervisors. Maybe they don't get very good education and they understand only the job is production, production, production and pushing the people. Many times this go to discrimination, but you know what? I say what can you know? You are the supervisor, you are the boss right here. But you need to follow the rules, also, we are following

the rules on this job, but this person many times treats really bad to my people.

*Miguel: All right, do you want to add something?*

Dora: No, we are same. Do you know sometimes you feel to you sometimes more good acceptance from the people, but we understand because this situation we don't see only with Americans, we see with a lot of people, and sometimes we see the situation for contrast, but I understand everybody who are different, so we are trying to, if this person is rude or something with me, you know, this is your problem, not my problem. So I have tried to see it same way.

*Miguel: During the time you have been in the United States, have you returned to you native land? Do you go back and if so how often?*

Arturo: Well, basically the first time we arrived in 1988, but the first two years we couldn't go there.

*Miguel: You couldn't go the first two years.*

Arturo: We couldn't go the first two years. Respect the rules according with the Immigration because when we get the green cards, say you need to stay here, and you need to be good boy, or you need to work hard, and you forget about your country.

*Miguel: Okay, that's fine.*

Arturo: But anyway after 19th we started traveling frequently to Mexico. About three, four, five times a year. Now the situation changed because now we have different responsibilities. Now we go to Mexico maybe one time a year or two times a year.

*Miguel: Do you maintain contact with the people in your native country? Do you keep in contact with your family and friends.*

Arturo: Yes, absolutely. But this contact is more basic emails now. You know the communication is great now because you make contact like this and this way, but anyway now after many years now not too much, only my family.

*Miguel: What about you, Dora, do you keep in contact with your family and friends?*

Dora: Yes, we keep contact with the family and some friends.

*Miguel: Arturo, you mentioned email. Is that how you keep in contact with the friends and family? How do you keep in contact with them? What means?*

Arturo: Well, it doesn't take any time daily. Rapid.

*Miguel: By email?*

Arturo: Yes, by email because the prices for phone is too high, and sometimes we need some very important or urgent to contact with this person by phone. We do by this way, but basically is by email.

*Miguel: Do you send money back to your native country?*

Arturo: Yes, I do to my parents. I do every fifteen days. I send money to them.

*Miguel: What about you, Dora? Do you send money back?*

Dora: No. I sometimes send to my parents, but they are living in El Paso here in the United States.

*Miguel: Do you think that at some point in the future you will return to your native country?*

Arturo: No. I think, we went to our country eight years ago. We are trying to make some business over there, we had some money. We went over there, but you know, everything changed, and we are trying to make this business with some friends and family and they lie to us and we lose some money over there. To me I think is not very secure to start business over there because if you want to start a business over there, you need to live some years over there to see again what is going on around, but to make investment over there right now, I need to take time. My kids born here, and I want to see them go to high school, college, and university, but the point is stay here. Maybe when I retire to buy

a little small land over there and move over there.

*Miguel: Is that what you think?*

Dora: We are same.

Dora: Stay together, move together.

*Miguel: About your expectations and reality, what were your ideals and dreams about America, about the United States? What's what you had in mind?*

Arturo: Well, okay, I don't like to speak only for USA, I like to speak about the Americans. Always I remember for Martin Luther King, Jr., he start when he make a big big congregation, he start to say "I have a dream." But also to me I have a dream, and this dream is work together and stay together no matter if it is white, black, Hispanic. I think we can live together here everyone, and I think we need to provide this opportunity to everyone, and everyone has the opportunity, but depends on each one or each person to get the dreams or goals.

*Miguel: Do you want to say something, Dora, about your ideas and your dreams about America?*

Dora: I think the Dr. say everybody come to the United States is because we want a better style of life. Fortunately we thought it was going to be better here. In Mexico too, but we both are comfortable here.

Dora: On this point everybody knows the South America or Central America the people say okay the American dream is here, but my point of view the American dream is everywhere. Here maybe you can get the American dream more easily or possible. But the American dream is not only to buy a new house or new car, but the American dream also is to have very good health. You need to get information about health. It is to get education. It is for work opportunities. I think if we put together everything, I think this is the American dream, health, education, lifestyle, work opportunities, everything is the American dream. Not the American dream is only to have a nice pickup, or outside the mobile home, the price is \$1000, and the pickup is \$35,000 or \$40,000. It needs to be...It can be...

*Miguel: Balanced.*

Arturo: Balanced.

*Miguel: What do you like and dislike about American society?*

Arturo: To me I like everything. Depends on the person, what the person wants to be. If you follow rules and you have a very good lifestyle, you can grow up economical. Well, this covers everything. It is important if you live here or you live in your country or you live in a different country. I think it depends on each person.

Dora: Yes, I think so. I think this is good, and try to follow your dreams. I think anybody can do anything they want. Always we followed the right way because at this moment we helped a lot of people and they take the wrong way. Sometimes they like to get things maybe illegally, but this is not the way. The best way is working hard and do the right thing and to avoid any problems with anybody.

Arturo: And wait for the opportunity when it knocks on your door. Many times this opportunity takes time, but many times we don't see this opportunity. Many times this opportunity comes to your house.

*Miguel: Do you think the quality of your life in your case has improved?*

Arturo: Well, yes. Now we have, we live very nice like a family, and we have very good work, and we have very good house. I think to me we have more than we deserve. I think we have a lot of things. We need to say thank you, God. We have everything and we did good. We are healthy.

Dora: Yes, I think so. We got a lot of blessings from God. For us, when we got this job and the opportunity with the open door was very good because on this job we have right now, the expectations for the job are our expectations because regularly we try to help our community.

*Miguel: Do you think it is important to maintain your national identity and why?*

Arturo: Basically we keep our national identity, but we are living here in USA. We get the citizenship in 2001 because we decide to stay here to support our kids. They need to see we are following all requirements to be here, but to keep our identity is very important because for Hispanics our values and beliefs are strong by the family. To me the family is more important and have a priority in my life.

Dora: I agree with Arturo. We try to keep communication with family. When we have the opportunity we go to El Paso or Chihuahua and try to combine our family and friends and they try to show them how is the life over there and they see what is the difference some times because in our families we have more families and we try to stay in contact. We try to show the history in Mexico, the history in our family, and try to explain more about us and our history because we don't want this lost. Especially we don't want they lose the language.

*Miguel: Your native language?*

Dora: Yes. We try to keep always the language and I think this is very important.

Arturo: Basically it is a good idea for know for only us but for our people to continue with the language. Basically we speak only Spanish at home, and they are getting English in school or in the community, but basically we are trying to speak both languages. But our home is only Spanish.

*Miguel: Is part of your identity, you keep your native language.*

Arturo: Yes, and this way they can see where we came from and they keep all the information or identity.

*Miguel: As immigrants living in the United States, what are your greatest challenges right now? What do you see as a challenge?*

Arturo: Number one, I want to speak very very high level, and I think this is a challenge because many times when I go to the state meetings, sometimes it is a few words, sometimes I don't understand, and many times when you say something and you are between one word...

*Miguel: It changes the whole meaning.*

Arturo: Exactly. That is my biggest challenge. Also, the other one is I want to see for all people to increase the condition of living for the people, especially for migrant people. I hate to see on the news, the TVs, the newspapers, we found a trailer with 25 immigrant people, and these people died. I hate to see that. Also the numbers of the people crossing the border dying in this process. I hate to see it. To me, the government need to do something, both governments, not only here. Also Mexico, but we see many difficulties in our countries.

*Miguel: Dora, what do you think is your greatest challenge?*

Dora: The language, too.

*Miguel: The language.*

Dora: And continue help to the people. Continue give the model for my kids, try to be a good model for my kids, and continue growing in our community and our traditional ways.

Arturo: I would like to add something. Many people who were born in the USA, American or citizen people, many people think we are same. If we come from Mexico or any country, South America, they think we come, we are poor, we don't have very good education, and we are not organized, we have our house too dirty inside, outside, but you know at this moment we are receiving people with a very good education. Like you, you have a master degree, and I think now the people who are coming, the new immigrants, these people, the new immigrants, are coming with very good education.

*Miguel: More educated*

Arturo: Yes, correct. Now I would like to give this message to people living here. We come to try to find living conditions better, to get very good education, to adapt to this country. We don't try to get his jobs or we not trying to reduce the opportunities for people living here, no, we come to try to work together to be a community.

Dora: I would like to add a little bit about that. I think so in the future we will receive more immigrants, but these immigrants regularly will be professionals because in our countries is very sad to see professionals to have to sell hot dogs in the streets when they were in the universities over there. The reason is because not there are employment for them. But mostly these people try to come to the United States to get the American dreams. And at this moment all these professionals, they will give good help and ideas to the United States, so I think this is because the United States is a good country because all the immigrants, we try to give the best things. I think we always see good new with things in the future.

*Miguel: That's good, okay, anything else you want to add?*

Arturo: No, just thank you for this opportunity, and I hope the researches receive a very good source for information. I hope it is good for everyone.