

Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

Interview with Carlos De Leon

July 2, 2005

Interviewer Miguel Giner

Interview conducted initially in Spanish

Miguel: Good morning, can you tell me your name, please?

Carlos: Carlos Cristobal De Leon Gonzalez.

Miguel: And what is your date of birth, Mr. De Leon?

Carlos: the 13th of July, 1946

Miguel: And what was your place of birth?

Carlos: Guatemala.

Miguel: In the city of Guatemala?

Carlos: In the city of Guatemala.

Miguel: What is your race or ethnicity, Mr. De Leon?

Carlos: Hispanic.

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

Carlos: I am the youngest of five siblings. The oldest (sister), I don't remember well but I think she is 62...Olga is...she is like two years younger, I am the youngest, I don't remember well, do I have to give you all their ages?

Miguel: Not necessarily...

Carlos: Esperanza...Adelia is like 58, Olga like 55, my brother is 60 I think, and I am 59.

Miguel: So, there were three sisters and two brothers, and you are the youngest.

Carlos: Yes.

Miguel: Your parents are still alive?

Carlos: No, they died.

Miguel: When was that?

Carlos: My father died in Guatemala in 83, I lost my mother in 2000, she died here in Liberal, Maria Carranza.

Miguel: Who among your family members continue to live in your native country?

Carlos: I have a brother, Victor De Leon.

Miguel: Your brother continues to live in Guatemala.

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.

Carlos: That's right.

Miguel: And your sisters?

Carlos: I have two sisters here in Liberal, and one in Kansas.

Miguel: What language did you speak at home when you were little?

Carlos: Spanish.

Miguel: And now?

Carlos: I spoke some English. I did not have the opportunity to study when I first came but (now) I speak some English.

Miguel: When did you come to the United States?

Carlos: In the year 84 (1984).

Miguel: When you lived in your country, what was your occupation, Mr. De Leon?

Carlos: I do not know how it is called (here) but my job was in aluminum and glass, I don't know how is it called.

Miguel: For how long you worked in that capacity?

Carlos: Almost since I was 15 years old until I was 35 I worked on that.

Miguel: And, do you remember what was your weekly salary approximately?

Carlos: I earned more or less, when I was about to come, the last few years, I had different salaries, when the Quetzal was about the same as the dollar I made about 19 Quetzales a day, plus travel expenses because I went all over, I have been to all the "Departamentos" (states), I know all over Guatemala.

Miguel: Was that a good salary?

Carlos: Yes, I lived well, I felt good with that, I had two children, Claudia and Hector, we live well, and we had trips and everything.

Miguel: Can you tell me something about your living conditions in your native country before you came?

Carlos: Before coming, like I told you, I lived well, I had my salary, traveling expenses because I went out of the capital city and my children Saturdays and Sundays we always went to the sea, to the park, they know Guatemala very well, through my job I took them out to travel and we ate well. Over time they went to study, even in Liberal they went to school and they are very well.

Miguel: They were very young when you immigrated to the United States?

Carlos: Yes, my daughter was 13 years old more or less, the son was about 12...11, and the small one was 3 when we left Guatemala heading this way.

Miguel: What is your religion Mr. De Leon?

Carlos: I have always been Catholic.

Miguel: When you lived in your country you ever suffered harassment, physical or mental abuse or imprisonment or torture from the authorities?

Carlos: No, never.

Miguel: Let's talk a little about your experience as an immigrant. What do you remember, or when was the very first time that you heard about the United States?

Carlos: Was in the year 75 (1975) more or less that my sister...she had already been here for years when she asked me if I wanted to come to the United States and I said what am I going to do in the United States because I was fine over there and I told her that if she helped me with my papers that I would

be here the next day. We fixed my papers, she applied and I got my papers in about six months to get my residency papers and that is how I got them fixed, did not last that long, perhaps eight months and we were on our way. It was Holy Week that I came to be precise.

Miguel: In 1984.

Carlos: Yes, 1984.

Miguel: What moved you to settle in Southwest Kansas?

Carlos: The only thought was to change my children's destiny because I thought in reality...I thought it was good but at the same time I thought about the language because to me has been difficult up to this date but not to them, they are doing very well.

Miguel: What can you tell us about your migration trip when you migrated to the United States?

Carlos: It was fantastic, I drove from there, like I said, in 1975 I was given a pick up for being a supervisor, my ex-employer told me that vehicle is for you to use it and I am going to give you a job as supervisor and I said that will be my ticket to the United States and that was the way it was, after eight months I got my papers and we came and the trip was driving for five days, during Holy Week, holidays, and we traveled all across Mexico. I entered (to the United States) through Piedras Negras and the travel was very good. This gives me a lot of animation because my children were cooling because it was a car that got hot a lot, a pick up, and they would come out to spray water on the radiator and that was also good for them. I drove all day, we slept at any town where we arrived, we were told to be very careful, to make it early because (people) would place some tree branches to make you stop to rob you but God was always with us and has been all the time.

Miguel: When you entered to the United States, where were you headed?

Carlos: Here to Liberal, Kansas.

Miguel: You had already relatives here in Liberal?

Carlos: My sister and my brother-in-law.

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

Carlos: I came with an invitation letter to work in a mechanic shop, I liked it in Guatemala to work as a mechanic and, this reminds me a lot because at Immigration they asked me what I was coming to do in the US because I did not speak English, I was coming to an area where only English was spoken, that was the way it was, only English was spoken. I started working painting houses, fixing plumbing, electric works because I can do all of that, woodworking, painting and many things. I did not go to work as a mechanic right away, I got started working in a restaurant called El Matador.

Miguel: Where was that located?

Carlos: Here in the South, the owner was a Jessy, I think he already died, I washed dishes, then I went to work at Bruce Well Service as mechanic helper but I wanted at least to start with the broom because U was not going to understand nothing but thanks to God it was easy.

Miguel: Around that time when you came to Liberal people almost did not speak Spanish.

Carlos: No. I would sat precisely at the store "Ideal" and "Gibsons" and "Alco" and when people came in there were two Latinos by the color of their skin and many Americans, now is the other way around, about twenty Latinos come in and about two Americans.

Miguel: Things have changed a lot...

Carlos: Things have changed a lot...

Miguel: That is a good observation...how did you find housing for the first time in this country?

Carlos: My sister rented me a house at short time later she told me that she would sell it to me and I did not get it instead I got an application from a bank, from People's Bank, I had to deposit 20 dollars, I deposited that to continue with the process if I wanted the house, and that is how suddenly I had access to the loan and we found a house on Pennsylvania (Street), and that is how we got it, it cost me 40 thousand dollars to pay in 30 years, they still owe a bit more...

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

Carlos: The most difficult was my separation from the wife, well, we were not in agreement, it was not a matter of deceit, none of that but...I had a problem on my back and that was difficult and my son who went to the military service, he joined the army. It was difficult when he left, very difficult, the hardest was during the Gulf War but he is back again, he has four children, he is married.

Miguel: Your son went to the Gulf War?

Carlos: That is right.

Miguel: And he came back...

Carlos: He is here.

Miguel: What has been your experience as far as the Immigration and Naturalization authorities?

Carlos: Well, I do not have any complaints about that, they have helped me very well, what I can say is that the American people have treated me well, the Latinos are the ones I have had problems. What is the reason? When a Latinos gets promoted they want to do the same they do in their country, I don't know why but I tell everybody the same, it is only with the (Latino) people the ones I have had problems. At any office, at any place, if they are Latinos and they speak Spanish they try to put down the same people. With the Americans, you ask them, you tell them and they do their job as they are suppose to, they don't ask more that they are supposed to. I think that...I have never lied to anyone and we get moving ahead...

Miguel: What has been your experience with teachers and school officials and the schools here in the US?

Carlos: Has been very good too, some times with my children, when they started school (here) they said that a given teacher did not like them and I would tell them that was not the case, that is was the language, having to adapt to it. He said that it was difficult and he felt that the teacher did not like him; it was not that, it was the language and he learned and saw that there was not a problem.

Miguel: What has been your experience with police or any other law enforcement agencies?

Carlos: For me police is good because they don't bother you, they don't ask for anything. We break the law and they have to correct you. Something very important, if you drink do not drive, that is very important about driving. Since 84 and after, this past year I have got three tickets, perhaps because of my nerves, my situation, my new life because I wanted to do everything faster, I think I stared to rejuvenate again, I got to think that I have to do it more calm, everything.

Miguel: Can you tell us if you have ever experience racism from the part of the Americans towards you?

Carlos: Like I told you before, I do not have any complaints about them, to the contrary, they have always given me a hand, I think that some people have told that there is a lot of racism but it is the language, it is the language what bothers to all.

Miguel: During the time you have been in the US, have you returned to your native country?

Carlos: Yes, several years ago, I went in 97, also by land, and in 2003 that I went to meet my wife. I knew here before but I did not know she was the same (person) and now I am with her.

Miguel: Do you maintain contact with people in your country?

Carlos: No, almost not. I only had contact with her by letter, by telephone.

Miguel: Do you send money to your native country?

Carlos: I used to; now the reason I did is with me here now.

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

Carlos: I do not think I would return because like in all Latin countries, violence and problems are growing and that is what it is recommended to parents, children depends from parents, the ones who take the wrong way it is the parent's fault, even teachers are not going to teach our own children how they must be because the first school is home, from there they are to leave prepared.

Miguel: Let's talk about expectations and reality. What were your expectations and reality about the US?

Carlos: Like I said before, to change the destiny to my children. I did. My daughter is a professional, she is a nurse; Hector served in the military, a little difficult to study, my desire was that they would get better, I think they have accomplished. I have the youngest, I think that the separation affected her, I feel she is the one I have the most difficulties with, personally. The one who does not study does not accomplish anything.

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

Carlos: The relations I had with people were more work-oriented, I like the way people participate during Christmas time, you are invited, they really don't have to give you nothing but they give because they want to. I have been lucky because I have obtained many things, I do not have any complaints about the American people.

Miguel: Where do you currently work?

Carlos: Wal-Mart.

Miguel: In what ways is the US similar or different to your native country?

Carlos: Well, the difference is that in my country...I do not have nothing bad against my country, it is very beautiful, it is the best for me too but if I wanted to go back I would go to live in a town, not in the city, in the city is more difficult. The difference is big because here I like it because it is quiet, like I said before, some (people) turn their radios very loud, some times my neighbors have the cars radios very loud, this is the difference, that they are noisier.

Miguel: What has been the most difficult aspect of American society that you have had to adjust to?

Carlos: The English, I feel that I need more English, I need to write English to have a better communication, after that there is nothing that...because I always tried to explain myself and they understand, some say that they don't understand me but I repeat it again and...but I have not had any problem with that.

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

Carlos: Secure, more secure. I am learning to write more or better in English because I feel that I need it, I feel that...but I don't care, I want to try at least to write and speak better.

Miguel: Do you think that your quality of life has improved?

Carlos: Has improved, well, I feel the same as if I was in my country, I feel the same, I was talking to my wife several nights ago what I used to earn, and here it is the same, at Wal-Mart each year we get an increase, like I said, it is the Latino who does not want other Latinos to get promoted but, all is fine. If they are Americans it's better.

Miguel: If you had an opportunity to speak with someone from your country thinking about migrating to the US, what advise would you give to them?

Carlos: To get their papers as it should be and not to take the risk to come just like that, that is what I have told many people, I have told that to some because it is better, even to my wife, I told her to wait and wait, and thanks to God she is here with her papers and everything.

Miguel: If the President of the US invited you to serve in an Immigration Committee, what suggestions would

you give him to improve the immigrant experience?

Carlos: Well, that is something that requires a lot of study in order to be able to tell them not to come just like that because there is people who charge them (money) and they don't get anywhere and then I think it is important to have studies. I would say, because I have thought about it a lot, charge Mexico for every person who is here so that they have to worry about their people because there is a lot of people like that over here, not only because I am fine (legal), I have always said that, but to charge Mexico for every person over here, may be that way things get better, the labor market gets better, because that is what makes them come, their needs, poverty, there are many things, not the ones from the city, Mexico City is too large, the ones from the surroundings, I think there is a lot of people, and there are the ones who want to come to visit, for the adventure, and well, everybody has the right to live their life, right?

Miguel: Let's talk a little about national identity, do you consider yourself American, Guatemalan, or both?

Carlos: Because of my English I do not consider myself American but yes, I am a citizen. I would like to be a US Citizen completely, I would like to, I would consider myself like that but I have a lot of Guatemala, like I said, I know a lot about Guatemala, and I know other places in the US.

Miguel: Do you consider important to maintain your national identity?

Carlos: I do not think so because if I am here I am living from the US, I have always said...I cannot speak bad about Guatemala because I lived in Guatemala, I raised my children in Guatemala and everything was good for me in Guatemala, The US has been good to me too because I have accomplished my things. I believe that there is nothing bad in saying that I am here, the US is the country of the dreams of many people, like I said, I did not think about coming because I was fine in my country but the opportunity arose and here I am.

Miguel: As an immigrant living in the US, what are your biggest challenges?

Carlos: English, it is the English, that is what people complain about, that there is a lot of discrimination and the problem is that a Latino can not be above because that is a problem, I think we need to study more that situation because (they tell you) you have to fix it again or I will not approve this or that and they won't, that was an experience recently, so I said I go to some other place, I presented my papers and the American said everything is fine, it will be taken care in ten days, so I think that we would have to see people who get promoted or become managers or supervisors not to treat or act like they are still in their country, to do the same. It is ok they get promoted but at the same time help others.

Miguel: Do you think the American society should adopt a bilingual model, bilingualism should be adopted?

Carlos: It is important the they speak two or three idioms, it is very important for the US because there is a lot of people who speak Spanish as well, and more now to be bilingual when they (apply) for jobs, here is when they need to have some who has studied, not just because they know some they get the position, that is the advantage among Latinos, that we work harder, we do the rough things more and, I am telling you by experience, I had the opportunity to be a boss in a company and I was able to give jobs to the Latinos rather than the Americans. The Americans, what they have, the young people, that are hard workers their way, and among Latinos, because they have needs, they work where ever he is told, there is the job and you have to do it, and he does it, and the Americans, because they are from here, they see it is hard for them to be told by a Hispanic, I think that is a difference, and without speaking English, we don't speak well, we don't say things perfectly, they feel that.

Miguel: In what ways the American society could improve its treatment towards immigrants?

Carlos: Like I said before, giving them studies or charging other countries, for every person we have here they would be charged, that would be a way of adjusting it, because there are some of us who send money, money that we don't spend here, I like always to tell the truth, there are cases that money is sent and that money is not spent here. I work since I came, I have worked legally since I came, I pay, I pay for all those people who don't want to work, people who get money, and because there are people, the husband and the wife work and they are still getting assistance. That is something that the US has to look closer, I am not sure I am saying the wrong thing but it's something that I have always seen, both

work and they still get help, and it affects a great deal to the US.

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

Carlos: Has become less hospitable because every one wants to take advantage, but you have to be honest, we have to work, because there is work, and there will be always people in need. The US has always considered, I have never had problems. In my case, when I injured my waist I was told to wait and instead what I did was to work, I worked, I got a small house, I bought it for me, and that was like therapy for me, I received a lot of therapy from the insurance as well, and here I am, I can do a lot of things.

Miguel: Very interesting. Is there anything else you would like to add or comment about before we finish?

Carlos: I would like to add something about parents, like I said, they have to in reality teach their children to be respectful.