

# Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

Interview with GB\* (Name has been changed to protect identity)

December 14, 2005

Interviewer Miguel Giner

*Miguel: Can you tell me what is your place of birth?*

GB: I was born in Durango, Durango, Mexico.

*Miguel: And what is your race or your ethnic group?*

GB: Hispanic.

*Miguel: Can you tell me how many brothers and sisters you have, and what are their ages?*

GB: It is a total of 13. Six are older, and six are younger than me. The youngest is 30, the next is 32, 33, 36-my sister, 38, 41, another one is 42, a brother is 43, 45, 47, 50, 52, and 54. The second to the oldest is a sister.

*Miguel: You are the middle child.*

GB: Yes. I am the one in the middle.

*Miguel: Are your parents still alive?*

GB: My mother just died on the fourth of May this year.

*Miguel: What about your father?*

GB: He is still alive.

*Miguel: Where does he live?*

GB: He comes and goes. He just went back to Durango in July.

*Miguel: Who among your family continues to live in your native country?*

GB: Currently only one sister. The one after me.

*Miguel: And the rest? Where are they?*

GB: Everybody is here in the United States.

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

GB: Before I came I was a supervisor in an auto service store called Soriana. I was a cashier's supervisor. I was the cashier's supervisor. I had to keep control of the schedules. I had to do the cash balances, also programming the registers. I had to get the total sale of products. I would get the average like how many customers they attended in one hour. I had to check when they came in and out, assign them to the registers.

*Miguel: How long did you work in that capacity?*

GB: Three years.

*Miguel: Do you remember what was your weekly or monthly salary?*

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.

GB: Well, that was twenty years ago. But I may say that my salary was, well honestly, I cannot remember.

*Miguel: Can you say it was a good salary or very good or not so good compared to the average?*

GB: Compared to the position that I had, it was not very good probably. It was a lot of work. Too many hours.

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

GB: One of the things was that employers would not facilitate or they would not give you a chance to do both, study and work. That was one of the things that I was doing, working and studying at the same time. At one of the stores I worked twelve hours and then I would have to go to study at the university. That is one of the reasons. That was part of my way of living. Also, at school they did not have schedules in a way that people can study and work at the same time. They do not help you on that. I think that employers do not cooperate enough with the schedules. They do not have flexible schedules like they do here.

*Miguel: Anything else about your living conditions in Mexico when you were young?*

GB: I consider that we lived in poverty. We were too many. My father was a construction worker, and most of us had to work since we were little to help the rest in the house.

*Miguel: What is your religion?*

GB: Catholic.

*Miguel: When you lived in your native country, were you ever subjected to harassment, or physical, or mental abuse or imprisonment or torture by the authorities, anything like that?*

GB: I was never in jail. I was never arrested in my country, but I had an experience with one of my brothers when the police came to my house asking us for money. There was an experience in which there was abuse from the authorities. That police officer gave a ride to my brother back home, and when they got to the house he tried to accuse my brother, but what he really wanted was money. That was an abuse of his authority.

*Miguel: How did you first learn about the United States? What is your earliest memory about the United States?*

GB: When my brother came here, my older brother, he is one year older than me, he came right after middle school. He was the first one to be here. For us, we saw the United States as an alternative. When you are looking for options, we see the United States as an option.

*Miguel: What brought you to live in Southwest Kansas?*

GB: The primary idea about moving to Kansas was so that my daughters could study in an area where there was not a lot of gang activity.

*Miguel: What year did you immigrate to the United States?*

GB: 1985.

*Miguel: And to Southwest Kansas?*

GB: In 1997. One of my daughters was 9 and the other one 8.

*Miguel: Do you remember that trip when you immigrated to the United States in 1985?*

GB: Yes.

*Miguel: What can you tell me about that trip?*

GB: I consider myself fortunate in that sense because I came without papers, and I had the opportunity to cross by El Paso, Texas. In Texas I took the plane to Los Angeles. My trip was not very... I stayed in Ciudad, Juarez, working, helping at the same store, Soriana, but with the idea of coming across. I came in 1985, and I made it to Los Angeles in May, right before school was about to finish. May 3,

1985.

*Miguel: How did you first find work in this country?*

GB: Through my sister. My sister recommended me with a friend. Her husband was a manager in a restaurant, and it was through her that I went to work at the restaurant in the evenings. My job was to be in charge of the salad bar and keep everything clean and maintain all the fruits and vegetables.

*Miguel: Can we say that in Mexico you had a good job?*

GB: In regards to my title and position, we can say yes. But there was not a lot of alternatives.

*Miguel: How did you find housing for the first time in the United States?*

GB: I only was able to purchase a house when I moved to Kansas. The reason was that I kept thinking in California that I was still looking for other opportunities. In the first place, houses are very expensive. A house that costs \$70,000.00 here, it costs about \$350,000.00 there. Payments are very high. I kept thinking that I could change jobs.

*Miguel: But when you first came to the United States, did you go to live with relatives?*

GB: I went to live with my sister, but my sister was married. I moved to live with some friends from Guatemala and from El Salvador like for about three years before I got married.

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

GB: Get adapted to the culture of the United States and the changes at work.

*Miguel: What has been your experience with Immigration Authorities?*

GB: Personally, I haven't. I had the opportunity to apply with the amnesty, and when I reached the fifth year as a resident, I became a US citizen. Personally, I have not had many problems.

*Miguel: What has been your experience with teachers and the schools in the United States?*

GB: The system, it's okay, but there is also a lot of politics. There is politics in the schools. One of the reasons I brought my daughters was because the politics in school. They manipulated the bilingual programs in order to get funds from the government and use them in other programs. That is one of the things that gets the students behind. That is one of the things I didn't like because my daughter was born here in the United States; however, she was always being manipulated to maintain her in the bilingual program even if I didn't want her to participate.

*Miguel: What has been your experience with the police in this country?*

GB: Personally, I have not had any problems with the police, but I truly believe that one of the issues is the language and the culture. Just because we don't know the culture, as Hispanics make mistakes, and because we come from another country.

*Miguel: That takes us to the next question. Can you describe any experience of racism from the part of the Americans towards you ever?*

GB: Well, for example, when you speak your language, like if I speak my language in a public place, people look weird at me, the Americans. It is like when I talk with my tone of voice and there are other people next to me, I feel like the other people don't like it, especially in public places like the library or the store or enclosed places where they can listen to you. You have the freedom, but some people feel intimidated. I was listening to a comment about that the other day. It was a show on immigration. It was about those groups along the border against Immigration. One of them was saying that, "We, as Hispanics, do not feel ashamed of speaking Spanish, that we don't feel ashamed of speaking publicly." That comment made me feel insulted, like if it was a shame to speak our language on the street.

*Miguel: He was saying like if it was a shame to speak Spanish.*

GB: Yes. It is like we need to go into hiding to speak or that we should think about it before we speak it.

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

GB: I have traveled. In the twenty years that I have been here, I have been there probably about ten times. At first it took me like seven or eight years to get my residency card. The first time when I came in '85, my first trip was in '89 or '88, it took me about three years, and after that I go every two years. I have had the opportunity to go on vacation to visit.

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

GB: Yes, I do. With friends and when I go to Mexico, I go visit them.

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

GB: Not anymore because now everybody is here, but when my parents lived in Mexico, I did.

*Miguel: Do you think that at some point in the future you will return permanently to Mexico?*

GB: I don't believe so, maybe when I retire, probably, as an option. I think that you can live in Mexico more at ease once you retire.

*Miguel: Let's talk about expectations and reality. What were your ideals and your dreams about the United States when you immigrated for the first time?*

GB: My main plan was to come to study for some time and go back to Mexico. That was my plan. I gave myself a time frame of five years. I came, I went to school, and then I got married three years later, but I continued attending school. At the end of the fifth year I started looking at the situation in Mexico more complicated because of the recession, then the devaluation of the money, and I thought about having to start all over again and get adapted. Especially I kept thinking about the reason I came and about having to start all over and having to start making relationships again. I felt that I was going back to the same reason why I came. I did not think it was the right time to go back yet.

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

GB: Mainly I think about the cultural changes. It is like you cannot totally adapt to the American culture because I was born in Mexico and I lived there for twenty-one years. I spent my childhood and my adolescence in Mexico. For me, it would be much harder because it has been twenty years, and I still cannot adapt to American society completely. I try, but I struggle. For example, the type of music, I don't like it sometimes. Many of the customs of the culture, I don't like them. I try to adapt, but I don't feel totally at ease. I don't get used to their ways completely. If I am at a party or gathering, I feel that I don't get totally satisfied.

*Miguel: In what way is America similar or different from your native country?*

GB: The only difference is the people because you find your own people here. The other situation is that they majority of us come almost with the same ideas, save and work and go back. That is what makes it similar that you are with your family, as well. That is what makes it a little similar.

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

GB: In the sense of security, I feel more secure here for the reason that, like you can walk on the streets, especially in this town. You can trust the authorities better. It is easier to file a complaint. You have more freedom of speech. I also see the economy in this country more stable.

*Miguel: Do you think the quality to your life has improved?*

GB: Yes, it has improved.

*Miguel: In what ways?*

GB: In the sense that, for example, I am trying to buy my house, my car. I try to live comfortable at home without having to rent an apartment, and all the opportunities, and many opportunities that I have taken advantage of. I have had the opportunity of getting a job.

*Miguel: If you had the opportunity to talk to someone from your country who was planning to immigrate, what advice would you give them?*

GB: I have a friend who works in Mexico, and when we talk and compare I tell him that if we could go back in time, and if he was in the situation in which he is now in Mexico, I would not come. It has been twenty years that I spent here. I have my wife, my children here. My life has changed here. For me, going back to Mexico and getting adapted there is going to take a lot of work. According to his situation, I would tell my friend to stay there in Mexico. The fact that I moved here, I see that as one of my stages in life. I have lived those stages in my life, but at the same time that if I lived those in Mexico, possibly I would have come. I would have gotten married in Mexico. I would have had my children there. That would probably make me think different, maybe because of my wife or my family the same way that that makes me think now.

*Miguel: You would tell people to stay where they are?*

GB: Yes. Independently from what they think and their situation, personally I go to Mexico, and I like it.

*Miguel: If the President of the United States invited you to serve on an immigration committee, what suggestions would you give to the President to improve the immigrant's experience?*

GB: First, immigration laws and the immigration system, there are many errors. For example, the case of the Salvadorans. They [Immigration Authorities] have not been able to foresee their work overloads, and that creates problems to them because Immigration was not prepared, and people are not aware of the situation. People went and they got an extension to be able to work because they were overloaded, and some employers took advantage of that because their work permits were about to expire and because the employers do not have the obligation to know the immigration law, they fired. In larger companies where they have a personnel department, they received memos or they were able to communicate with Immigration and understand that Immigration was overloaded, and they were issuing extensions. They even published a letter over the internet for employers, but what employer is going to have the patience, especially if they wanted to take advantage of the situation, particularly to independent contractors? Some of them because they are small employers are not aware, and that is one of the issues that the system, it's behind, even being a federal agency. There are immigration forms that have not been updated. They are obsolete. The immigration laws that have been passed are exactly against the people who don't have a vote in Congress as citizens. These are just people who are only in the process of becoming legal. There is not enough information.

*Miguel: Let's talk a little about national identity. Do you consider yourself Mexican, American, or both nationalities?*

GB: I consider myself an American. I am thankful to the United States, but like I explained to you, I came at twenty-one. Normally when you remember your life you think mostly about your childhood. I lived my adolescence in Mexico, and Mexico brings me more memories. I may say that I live in the United States only because it is convenient. I have adapted to the system because I don't want to live with deficiencies. I am always against racism and differences, and that has kept me and has not helped me to adapt to the rest of society because of that because I have always felt deprived of being Mexican. Even when I naturalized American, I lost the Mexican citizenship until March 20, 1998, when dual citizenship was approved. It has been about a month or two since I recovered my Mexican citizenship again.

*Miguel: Do you consider that it is important to maintain that national identity?*

GB: Definitely so. I think about the fact that I was born and grew up in a culture, and I feel proud of the nationality and country. I feel that I cannot change it. It is not easy to change it. That is why I have not adapted to American society.

*Miguel: In what ways have you attempted to maintain that national identity?*

GB: One way is speaking my language. When I have the opportunity to speak Spanish, I speak Spanish. If I don't have to use English, I don't do it. I feel more comfortable also with the music. My customs, I can also read better when I read in Spanish. I prefer to read in Spanish. I think that mostly through the language.

*Miguel: As an immigrant living in the United States, what are your greatest challenges now?*

GB: Like for example, increase or enhance in my daughters the pride of being Mexicans. At home I prefer to speak Spanish to my daughters. I don't like it when they mix Spanish and English, that they maintain the language in that they feel proud for being children of Mexicans.

*Miguel: Do you think that American society and education should adopt bilingualism?*

GB: I am not totally in agreement with bilingualism. I would consider that it might be important as a transitional program for a child who moves from Mexico during third or fourth grade and only for the purpose of helping the child maintain the interest in continuing studying and to help him adapt faster to school but only as a transitional program. Because if you have noticed in places where there are no bilingual people, in my experience for example; I saw that my daughter because she was the first one, they placed her in the bilingual program only to manipulate. I don't think that with bilingualism they can learn well either English or Spanish. In that sense I am not in agreement with bilingual programs, only as transitional programs.

*Miguel: Do you think the police should end the practice of racial profiling?*

GB: Definitely, yes. I think that they should. I don't know if they learn about cultural differences in order to better understand other cultures.

*Miguel: Do you think American society has become more hospitable or less hospitable toward immigrants?*

GB: I think that Americans in some aspects, if you don't have to compete with them, they don't bother you, but when the Americans see that you are competing with them like at work, health care services, they try to find a way out. In that sense, I think that there is more discrimination. It is something that politicians have used as a strategy, like that proposition in California that gave results to the politicians. I think that they take advantage from immigrants. They use them as an excuse to get rid of them.

*Miguel: In what ways do you think American society could improve its treatment towards immigrants?*

GB: I think that only by valuing their work, jobs as construction workers or dirty jobs, because I think that the large majority of those jobs are done by immigrants. They need the labor, but they do not accept it when there is talk about their contribution.

*Miguel: Is there anything else that you would like to comment or add in regards to your experience as an immigrant?*

GB: Well, like I said, unfortunately I think that for example I follow the news from Mexico, and I keep informed of what is going on in things like, for example, how they don't agree in Congress or the division caused by the political parties. I feel that in one way or another Mexico has tried to adopt the system similar to the United States, but it has not worked. For example, now in Mexico they have political debates when they already existed in the United States. They are doing primaries, like, they have to vote within the parties to elect the candidates. Unfortunately I think that in Mexico there are too many programs and too many plans, like here in the United States, but they don't carry them right because of the system that they have. They see the advantage, but they don't implement those programs a hundred percent. I think that in Mexico they are trying to implement enough plans and programs that already exist in the United States, but in Mexico it has not worked because there is a lot of corruption. In the United States, they have used and taken advantage of the immigrants.

*Miguel: Is there anything else you would like to add?*

GB: That's all.