

Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

Interview with Laura Cano

November 12, 2005

Interviewer Miguel Giner

Miguel: Good morning.

Laura: Good morning.

Miguel: Can you tell me what your name is?

Laura: My name is Laura Isela Loya Cano.

Miguel: Mrs. Cano, what is your date of birth?

Laura: January 30, 1973.

Miguel: And what is your place of birth?

Laura: Ciudad Cuauhtemoc, Chihuahua, Mexico.

Miguel: And what is your race or ethnicity?

Laura: Mexican.

Miguel: Or Hispanic.

Laura: Hispanic. But I'm from Mexico. I say "Mexican."

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

Laura: I have one sister that is 28, and that's it.

Miguel: Are your parents still alive?

Laura: My mother is still alive. My dad is deceased.

Miguel: Can you tell me when he died?

Laura: He died seventeen-years-ago.

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

Laura: In my native country I still have my grandparents from my mom's side of the family and aunts and uncles and several cousins.

Miguel: And your mother and your sister, where are they?

Laura: My mother and my sister live here in the United States with us.

Miguel: When you lived in your native country, Mrs. Cano, what was your occupation?

Laura: I was a child. We moved here when I was twelve, so I was student.

Miguel: Can you tell me when you came to the United States for the first time?

Laura: For the first time we followed a lot of the natural migrant patterns. Even though my dad didn't work with crops, he worked with the oilfields, in the oilfields, and so he would come and work for periods

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.

of time, and we would go back to Mexico because he had a dream to build a house. So the very first time we came I was in kindergarten, but we would just be here for a year and then we would go back to Mexico and then come back. I did kindergarten in US, first grade in Mexico, second grade in the US, half of third grade in the US, half of third, fourth, fifth, and sixth in Mexico, seventh and eight in the United States, half of ninth in Mexico, half of ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth in the United States. So we were always coming and going.

Miguel: Like you said, even when your father didn't work as a migrant seasonal farm worker, but your family was a migrant family because you kept coming and going.

Laura: Yes. Coming and going depending on the oilfield, how it was doing.

Miguel: Where in the United States, every time you came back from Mexico you always went to the same...

Laura: The same town, we always came to Perryton, Texas.

Miguel: Perryton, Texas. All the time.

Laura: Yes, my grandfather lived there, my mom's dad, so we would always come. It seemed like all our family that ever came to the US came to Perryton because that was their support system.

Miguel: So your grandparents lived there.

Laura: Only my grandfather.

Miguel: Your grandfather.

Laura: Yes.

Miguel: Why did he come to Perryton?

Laura: I really... he came long before in the early '70's and '60's. He came as a bracero, and he worked for the railroad track for a long time, and then he eventually ended up working in the oilfield there in Perryton, and that is how he started bringing my dad and his son, and you know different son-in-laws would come because he was there, and he was able to help them get started.

Miguel: During those times that you lived in Mexico, can you tell me about your living conditions? What was your life like?

Laura: Our living conditions, both my parents worked very hard, but there wasn't... a lot of time there wasn't enough money. There was always enough money for food, your basic necessities, but there wasn't always money for extra things like clothing or school things, or to have a car or anything like that. The house that we had was built little by little as my parents would come here and work in the US, so they built their house with \$5,000.00. That is how my dad saved \$5,000.00, and he was able to build a house. We were never hungry, but we weren't well off either. We knew that there were things that we just couldn't have.

Miguel: What is your religion, Mrs. Cano?

Laura: Growing up, I was Catholic, and then as my husband and I married, he was not from the Catholic denomination, so we found something else that we would both agree with, so right now we are Baptists.

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?

Laura: No.

Miguel: Let's talk about the immigration experience. You told me that you first came when you were very little, and you did kindergarten here in the United States.

Laura: Yes.

Miguel: And you already told me that you came with your parents because your father came to work in the

oilfield, so when did you stay finally? When did you finally stop moving?

Laura: As a fifteen-year-old. I came back when I turned fifteen-years-old, and we have stayed since then. There wasn't any more of the going back and forth, so I was fifteen when we finally stayed.

Miguel: What changed? Why did your family stop coming and going?

Laura: My father passed away, and at the time when he passed away, my mother wanted to move back to Mexico, or if not at least El Paso, Texas. She wanted to be close to her family, her parents, and her sisters, but I was in high school, and I would ask her all the time to please stay there because I had my friends and a boyfriend and all the different things, you know, and I would tell her to wait until we graduated from high school, and then we never moved back. Then I got married, and we just stayed there where my dad brought us. He brought us and left us in Perryton, and we stayed there.

Miguel: When did you move to Liberal?

Laura: Two years ago. I'm a teacher. I'm in the teaching business, I guess we could call it, and we moved here two years ago.

Miguel: You are the vice-principal at one of the local intermediate schools.

Laura: Correct.

Miguel: Can you tell me, do you remember during those migration trips, during those moving back and forth, do you remember one in particular? Is there anything about those comings and goings that you would like to tell us about?

Laura: You know, all that coming and going, it is very nerve wracking for even a child. As a young child, I was a child, and the whole time it is very scary, I guess we could say, because you are always with that fear that they are going to catch you and send you back, and I was always scared what is going to happen if I get separated from my mom? The very first time I came I was only five-years-old, and I remember a man, a coyote, putting me on his shoulders and crossing the river, and my mom had my baby sister holding her, and it was so dark, and I was holding on to this man, and I didn't know him, and I was so scared, you know, that I was going to fall or that he was just going to take me somewhere else. Then we crossed, and this lady took us in a car. The only thing I remember was my mom saying, "You have to just pretend you are asleep." That was so hard. As a five-year-old I was just sitting in the car pretending to be asleep.

Miguel: How many times did that happen that you had to do that?

Laura: That way, just one time. The other times that we came and went; we did it with a visitor's visa like a passport. We would just come to visit, but we would never go back.

Miguel: That first time must have been very scary.

Laura: Very scary, but I had not seen my dad in a long time, and I was so happy that I was going to get to see him.

Miguel: So after high school you finally stayed here. After age fifteen, you stopped moving.

Laura: We stopped moving.

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

Laura: I got my first job as a fifteen-year-old girl in telemarketing. I was selling these coupon books. That was my very first job ever. It was very hard because I did it all on the phone, and people would hang up on me, but that was the very first time I remember getting a job with a paycheck. Before that, as a thirteen-year-old, when we would come and go, I would clean houses with our landlord. They had a lot of trailer houses, and every time that somebody would move out, they would ask me to go help do the shampoo of their carpets and clean it for the next people to rent it. They were very nice to us, our landlords. I remember when I wanted to do my driver's education, I actually, I can't believe I did this, I asked him for a loan so I could pay for my driver's ed, and he let me borrow the money, and I paid

him back cleaning.

Miguel: You have come a long way since that time.

Laura: I think so.

Miguel: What about housing? How did you get housing?

Laura: When we came?

Miguel: Yes.

Laura: Well, at first when we would come we would always stay, I still remember that time the first time that we came, my dad was driving around Perryton trying to find a hotel so that we could stay the first night away from everybody because he lived in a house with my grandpa, and probably four other men lived there. They were all related, like cousins, you know, brothers. They all lived and my dad lived there, and it was a little house like a little one bedroom, two bedroom, little, bitty house. So the first time that we came we stayed at a hotel one night altogether as a family, and after that we went to this little bitty house until my parents found a place to live. There wasn't a lot of at that time places to rent, and I remember my dad's boss, he was the pusher from the oilfield. He was divorced and had a little girl my age. He asked my mom and my dad if we would live with them. My mom could take care of the girl while they worked, and we could just live in his house if my mom would cook and take care of the girl. We did that until my parents could get enough money to rent a house.

Miguel: What have been for you the most difficult adjustments that you had to make living in the United States, living in the American society?

Laura: Well, the very first thing is to learn the language. We had to learn to speak English and to do it well. I never really thought about not learning or not going to school. My parents didn't really say, "Oh, you need to go to school and do a good job." I just always saw it as my job, but to me it was hard at first to make that connection and how I had to develop a different set of values, a different way of being, that I couldn't just be. I had to learn to fit in, I guess. Especially in the '80's, there was not a lot of, in our school especially, you had to learn to fit in or you were not part of the group, and I think all throughout those years you spend all your time trying to develop this identity, and a lot of times it's not even what you want to be.

Miguel: What has been your experience with Immigration and Naturalization Authorities?

Laura: That took a long time. Three years ago, four years ago, I became a US citizen. But it took about ten years from the time we started the process to the time it ended. It was, I'm not saying that it's not a friendly process, it's just a very long process, and so many people are trying to get their legal status fixed. I just found it to be very nerve wracking because I didn't want to live in Mexico, I wanted to live here, but I also wanted to work, and I wanted to better myself. So all through college and through high school, well through high school as a senior, that's when I started working on it and through college, just going through college and trying to fix all this immigration. It was always in the back of my mind, and I was willing to do whatever I needed to do and wait however long we needed to wait to get it done. We worked at it really hard.

Miguel: The next question is about teachers and schools in this country, and you are a teacher and a vice-principal, but I would like to ask you if don't mind about your experience when you were a child in school? What was your experience, if you don't mind answering, when you were growing up and you attended school in Perryton? What was your experience?

Laura: When I was really little, I don't remember. I don't remember ever being discriminated against or anything like that. I always felt that I had very helpful teachers. I always tried about a hundred and ten percent. I wanted to do a good job, and I wanted to be the best. I guess in my own ignorance I never knew that I wasn't supposed to be able to do it even though maybe some of these teachers thought that there was no way we could do it. I never felt that. I always thought I could do it. That just made me

try a little harder even though I would get frustrated, but there was probably, now that I am in teaching and now that I see teachers, I think I wonder how many of those teachers thought “There’s no way this little girl is ever going to make it.” But I never knew that. I think I was just ignorant to that, and I just tried a little bit harder. I felt that I received a good education in Perryton. I feel that they prepared me well, and whether they believed I could do it or not, that is beside the point because I got what I needed to get.

Miguel: What do you think now, being a school official? What do you think about schools in general, the education system as far as serving immigrants? What is your thought on that?

Laura: I have a lot of mixed emotions. I am not speaking general about everybody, but I do believe that the education system sees immigrants as an obstacle to them doing what they are supposed to do. I see a lot of resentment. “Will they cost us a lot of money?” Or if we have to provide special training, they can’t do it. I hear they can’t do it, they just don’t know. That to me is why I’m doing what I’m doing because I am showing people that, yes, you can do it. I believe in my heart that this is the very best way I can pay my dad, coming over here, pay him for bringing us to the United States, by helping other boys and girls that are going through the same thing that we went through, but that is one of the biggest obstacles. They see it as a problem, and they are not a problem, they are just students. The only thing they don’t know is English, but they can learn.

Miguel: I would like to make a personal comment, that you are a very positive role model for this community. I think that we should be very thankful that you are here in this school district. Now that we are talking about education, I want to jump to this question here. Do you think that the American society and the education system should foster bilingualism? There has been a lot of debate about English only and that sort of thing.

Laura: I am a hundred percent for bilingual education. I believe that when you use your native language to connect to your second language you are going to be that much more successful. It is not about taking away a language or a culture; it’s about acculturation versus assimilation. I don’t want to be white. I don’t want to pretend to be white. I value their system. I am a part of it. I participate. I respect it. I do Thanksgiving. You know, we cook a turkey. We do all those things. I have acculturated into the country. I can live in both cultures, but I see a lot of families and a lot of students. As they grow older, they assimilate when they take the whole white culture and forget about who they are and where they come from, and I think where we are, our language, our tradition, that’s what makes us be who we are. I believe, and I fight this all the time, I believe that by keeping your Spanish strong and by knowing Spanish. you are better able to learn English and function in society.

Miguel: Thank you, Mrs. Cano. What has been your experience with the police and other law enforcement agencies in this country?

Laura: I’ve never really, I think that many times in things that I have seen, not necessarily personally, but people around me that have had to deal with the police and law enforcement, I do feel that sometimes they over-generalize, or well, you know, “He’s this, so they must be crooks, and they are trying to get in trouble.” They stereotype. I do feel that a lot of that stereotypical behavior can be seen in some of the law enforcement. I have been stopped before and things like that, and I have never been treated unfair or anything like that, but I have seen other people around me that I do feel have been treated unfairly because of where they are from.

Miguel: Would you please describe any occurrence of racism on the part of the Americans towards you? Have you ever experienced racism?

Laura: I don’t know that it is necessarily racism, but I do experience even now a lot of people just stereotype to what it is that you can be or accomplish. If I am ever asked, “Well, where do you work?” and I say, “Well, I work for the school.” Immediately they assume that I am either a custodian or a cook or maybe a paraprofessional. On more than one occasion I have had the pleasure, I guess I could say pleasure of, “Well, no actually this is what I do. I’m a teacher,” or now, “I’m the assistant principal.” I can see it in their face, it’s too late. By then they already have shown what they believe. When we were buying a house in Liberal, one ! of the realtors, she immediately assumed that we were working

as a para, and there is nothing wrong with it, there is nothing wrong with it, but in that sense, it's a job. I would be very proud to be a custodian, or I would be very proud to be a cook. It's not that it's a bad job; it's just that people always assume that they are going to be in a manual job.

Miguel: During the time that you have been in the United States, have you returned to your native country, and in fact you went several times. Since you settled finally in the United States, have you been back to Mexico?

Laura: Yes. There was a period of time, about six years or seven years that I didn't go because of my legal status. I was very scared that I wasn't going to be able to come back. I like to follow the rules, and I was just, I did not want to come illegally again. I was already in college, and I was married. I had a daughter. So there was a long time right there that we didn't go, but then when it all started working out, it was my first year of teaching. So my first time to go back was at 22. Ever since then we go every two, three years to visit family.

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

Laura: Mainly with my grandmother. I maintain pretty good contact with her. She is a pretty special lady in my life, and she is probably the only reason I go to Mexico, to see her. I don't know that when she's gone, I know my husband has family there, his dad, and we will probably continue to see them, but I don't know that I'll have too many reasons once my grandparents are not there.

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

Laura: No, I don't.

Miguel: Do you think that at some point in the future you would return to your native country to stay forever, retire in Mexico?

Laura: I don't see us retiring in Mexico or going to live in Mexico. We talk about it every now and then and say, "What would we do over there?" and we are so used to life here, and we like it here, so I don't think we'll ever go.

Miguel: You have children growing up here.

Laura: We have children growing up, and we want them to make a life here, and we want to be a part of their life.

Miguel: We're going to talk about expectations and reality. What were your ideals and dreams, or what have been your ideals and dreams about American? You decided to stay. You didn't want to move back with your mother. At fifteen, she wanted to go back, and you wanted to stay.

Laura: My dad was always say "vamos a ir al otro lado", we are going to the other side, because we are making our house. It always seemed to me that this was the place where we could get things going. I still tell a lot of people that on our very worst day here in the United States, on a day that we think "Today is just a bad day, I don't have any money," it is still a better day than your best day in Mexico. Our worst day here is still better than our best day in Mexico. I always knew that here was where I was going to be able to do something. Even though I worked in restaurants, and I cleaned houses when I was very young, I always knew that I wanted to go do something else, that I wanted to go to college. My mom didn't want me to go to college. Whenever I was in high school as a senior and I said, "Mom, I want you to take me to the college, they are having a parent day, and I want you to go with me," and she didn't want to. She would cry and ask me why I wanted to go to college, that I already had a job as a secretary. I was working in an oilfield company, and I was a part time secretary. She thought that if I could get a full time job there that I would be fine. Why did I want to go to college? So, I went to college on my own. I knew that I wasn't going to get any help, and my mom, the only thing that my mom helped me with college was one book that she bought for me. It was \$55.00, and everything else we did it on our own because she didn't.

Miguel: Where did you go to college?

Laura: I went to college at Panhandle State University in Goodwell, Oklahoma. It is a very small rodeo

school. All they have there is rodeo and teachers. And I was not a rodeo person, and I always wanted to be a teacher since I was a little girl, and my now husband was my boyfriend at the time in high school, and we had every reason to fail because I was expecting a baby at eighteen-years-old. We were going through all these things of, well, let's not go to college, and let's just work, and you know my mom's dreams were going to come true of me just being a secretary, and I remember it was a week that rained, and I said, "But I want to be a teacher." He said, "Well, then let's go," and we just went with nobody to help us. We wanted to be teachers.

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

Laura: About American society, I love the opportunity. If you want it, and you want to work for it, you can do it. It doesn't matter, there is this idea that you can do it, and it is up to you. It's your choice. It's your choice whether you go for your dream. I feel that that is a big ideal thing that the US has and that the American culture has, and I love that, and I love that we have the choice, that we have the freedom to do what we want to do. Whether you face obstacles, whether they're racism or prejudice or whatever you face, you can still do it. You just have to want to do it. I don't know that I dislike anything. I'm sure that there are little things, but nothing major that would make me think I hate, you know, I love living here.

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

Laura: Everything is, a lot of things are very different. Not everything, but a lot things. When we go to visit for a week we are always ready to come back. We get tired of the loose laws in Mexico. Everybody does whatever they want out in the traffic, and they get in front of you, and they run red lights. We got stopped a couple of times by this police officer, and he was just so obnoxious and just really giving us a hard time, I think, because we were from here. Sometimes I don't like their laid back, everything is relaxed. There are no time crunches, and I'm like, "People, come on, move." That is the difference. People are very relaxed there, and they have really different work schedules than we do. I sometimes don't get a lunch break, and most of my cousins have two hours for lunch. I'm thinking, in this way, that's different.

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

Laura: I feel more secure now. I just feel that our security costs. We work, and we are taxpaying citizens, and we have an infrastructure to protect us in different levels. I do feel that we are all a part of it, and we all contribute to making it work. A lot of people don't agree with, "Oh, we pay so much taxes," but I think it's part of the way we live, and it provides for things like security. I do feel that sensible decisions are made in order to protect the country or do what is best for the people that live here.

Miguel: Do you think the quality to your life has improved since you came since you came to this country? Since you decided to settle? Your life is better here, improved, with respect to how it could have been in Mexico?

Laura: I think so. I do think that...if I was still living in Mexico, I think that I would still be, probably I would have still gone to school. It probably would have been a lot harder, and I would have had to work a lot harder, but that is something that I think I still would have wanted to do. Even if I was working as a teacher in Mexico, there is no way I would have made what I was making when I was teaching in the United States. I don't know that if we would compare the same profession that I have now and a similar profession in Mexico, I don't think it could compare to the things that I am able to do here.

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

Laura: To get ready. To get ready to learn and to work hard, but I always encourage people that they are going to make it. I have about twenty students at Sunflower School that don't speak any English right now. They are brand new. I talk to their parents just Thursday, and I told their parents a long time ago I was a little girl just like your kids here and didn't know any English, and I want you to help them, and I want you to trust us that we are going to help them. But that is what I would tell them, to be patient and to be ready to work hard.

Miguel: If the President of the United States invited you to serve on an immigration committee, what suggestions would you make to improve the immigration experience? What would you tell the President?

Laura: I really don't know. There is so much red tape that we have to go through. I would ask for him to look at the people who are really wanting to stay here for the right reasons who are holding jobs, who are wanting to study, who are wanting to make the country a better place. I see a lot of people. I have seen people that do get their papers, and they never do anything with it. They live off of others. They live off of government help and things like that, and I see a lot of students sometimes with the Dream Act that they were trying to pass so that students without legal papers to go to university. I see many students wanting to go to college, and they can't. I would have special, I think as an educator, I would have special laws or special circumstances for people who are wanting to make this country a better place because I believe I make it a better place.

Miguel: We are going to talk about national identity? Do you see yourself as an American or Mexican or both?

Laura: I see myself as a Mexican who is very proud to live in America.

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

Laura: I do think it is important to maintain that identity because without knowing who you are and where you come from, then how are you going to know what you stand for? How are you going to know what you believe? How do you know what it is that you want to fight for every day? If you can just say well, "I could be either, or," I think you have to maintain who you are to be able to be better anywhere.

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

Laura: We talk in Spanish at our house with our kids, with our mom, with our family. I can listen to a country CD just as well as I can listen to a Mariachi. We don't necessarily celebrate all the holidays, but we know what they are, and we try to keep in contact with what is going on, continue to read in our native language, and I never back down "Well, where are you from?" I always tell people. I am not ashamed.

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

Laura: What are my greatest challenges? My greatest challenges right now are convincing people that what we need to change in the education system to help students that come from other countries, changing teachers' minds about why they are achieving low or why they are not achieving because that is what I see my constant challenge. I guess in my professional realm those are my challenges, changing peoples' minds. And I believe I can only do it one person at a time, and I work at it every day.

Miguel: I have a couple more questions for you, Mrs. Cano. In what way do you American society could improve its treatment of immigrants? How could society improve treating immigrants?

Laura: I think that is a change that is going to take a long time because I think it comes with acceptance and acceptance that people are people no matter who you are or where you come from, and I think a lot of times we as people believe that we are right. What we believe is right, and what we believe is the right thing, so it is very hard for a lot of people to say, "Well, why would you leave your whole country? Why would you leave your family to come and make a life here?" They begin to stereotype. "Well, these people, they are lowlifes. They are no good. They come and take our money. They come and take this and that, you know." I think it all comes to acceptance and accepting people. We are all people.

Miguel: Do you think that American society is becoming more hospitable or less hospitable to immigrants?

Laura: I see it both ways. It depends. A lot of people are trying very hard. I know of a lot of people that want to make things better whether it is in education or health. There're churches that are trying to accommodate, but I still, "Well, this is what we are going to do for our Hispanics." It's like we're trying to do it to make us feel better. You know, "Well, this is the food pantry for the Mexican

people,” and, you know, they are the only ones that come. Yes, they are doing those good things, but why not just say, “These are the people that need it right now” whether you are whoever, but I think that there are a lot of people who are putting extraordinary efforts into help immigrants, and I see things that are changing. People are becoming more accommodating. They are starting to see the value and the kind of money that those workers pull in, and they are starting to pick up on that, so I do see it as friendlier and as more inviting, but there are still those underground, “Well, how are we going to reach these people.”

Miguel: Mrs. Cano, is there something else you would like to say or add from your experience as an immigrant? Something else that you would like to tell us before we finish?

Laura: I don't really have anything in particular. All I know that is all the experiences that I have had, whether they have been good or positive, have helped me to be the person that I am today and the person that wants to make a difference for other students and in parents. I'm proud of who I am. I'm proud of who I've become and excited that I know things are going to change for the better for immigrant families everywhere.

Miguel: Thank you, Mrs. Cano.

Laura: You're welcome.