

Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

Interview with Leslie De Leon

July 16, 2005

Interviewer Miguel Giner

This interview was conducted in Spanish.

Miguel: Can you tell me your name please?

Leslie: My name is Leslie De Leon.

Miguel: Leslie, what is your date of birth?

Leslie: The 25th of January, 1969.

Miguel: Oh, my brother, the youngest, he was born on the 25th of January, 1968. Only one year difference. Where were you born at?

Leslie: Guatemala.

Miguel: In the city of Guatemala?

Leslie: In the city of Guatemala.

Miguel: What is your race or ethnicity? Hispanic?

Leslie: Hispanic.

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

Leslie: I'm the only child.

Miguel: You're the only child. Are your parents still alive?

Leslie: Yes, but the ones who raised me were my maternal grandparents.

Miguel: But your biological parents are still alive or not?

Leslie: My mom does. About my father, I'm not sure. I don't know if he is alive or not.

Miguel: Have you ever had any contact with him?

Leslie: No, I have never had any contact with him.

Miguel: Do you have contact with your biological mother?

Leslie: Yes.

Miguel: But it was your maternal grandparents who raised you in the city of Guatemala?

Leslie: Yes.

Miguel: Among you relatives, who still lives in your country?

Leslie: The children of my uncle, most of them remain there. Only one sister of my grandmother who lives in Los Angeles. She is the only one in the United States, but from the remaining relatives, the majority

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.

are still there.

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

Leslie: I was an accountant. I always worked as an accountant assistant.

Miguel: For how long did you work in that capacity?

Leslie: Like for about six years, and at the same time I was studying in law school and to be a notary, and I did my practicum in like two years in the tribunals.

Miguel: When you worked as an accountant, what was your salary?

Leslie: When I worked, salaries were very low. I started earning \$800 quetzales because it was a temporary job. Then I went to another place, and I earned a little bit more, \$1200, \$1400 which was a little bit more until last year before I came here, like around in July, but I didn't get any increase or anything.

Miguel: In dollars, how much would that be?

Leslie: That is the equivalent to about 100 dollars every month.

Miguel: Is 100 dollars considered a good salary or not?

Leslie: According to the cost of living because the cost of everything has increased, it is very little because I had my two children, my mother, so it was very little for four people.

Miguel: And you had a good job, you had good work. You earned...

Leslie: Well, let's say, that is what they paid for my career. Yeah, it's very little.

Miguel: 1200 quetzales, that's pretty much like 100 dollars a month. Can you tell me a little bit more about the life conditions, what life was like in your country before you came to the United States?

Leslie: It was very precarious. We always lived like day by day, and sometimes I didn't get enough because I was renting. I had to borrow, and the company where I was did not give a lot of opportunity. The most I could borrow was 500 quetzales, which was not enough. At the bank, if I borrowed 1000, I would have to pay back like 1500 because of the interest. But there is not a lot of opportunity in Guatemala. Like for example, employment, and there is a lot of professionals because I know a lot of them, but they have to work in things that are not their career. Like engineers, lawyers, but with a very low salary that I feel that in Guatemala is not being recognized that what the professional people are worth and like now at the level of the economy in the world has gone down very much, and that makes the people to migrate.

Miguel: Is there a lot of unemployment in Guatemala?

Leslie: A lot.

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

Leslie: Spanish.

Miguel: What is your religion?

Leslie: Catholic.

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

Leslie: No, never.

Miguel: Let's talk about your experience as an immigrant. How did you first learn for the first time or what is your earliest memory or what do you remember about the United States?

Leslie: Well, my decision to come to the United States was because I met Carlos. Before, I had no plans to travel. I have always thought remaining in Guatemala, but when I met him, he told me if he had the possibility of bringing me legally with my children, and he brought me here, and here we are because

we came legally without taking any risks. We had to wait a very long time, almost three years to be able to come here because of the paperwork and it was either this or that. When I had to appear at the embassy of the United States, I was told that I needed to have another sponsor, and like everybody else in Guatemala when they are trying to come legally and they do discrimination, and then the American comes and says, "Go on," and they tell them to go ahead without having to wait in line or anything, and they open the doors because it is the Embassy of the United States. But if it is Guatemala or somebody else with little resources from another department, I feel that there is a lot of discrimination because they make them wait a very long time, and then they ask them what they came for, and they are asked a lot of requirements. They give them a piece of paper, and they look at you and ask you for more requirements than they show on the paper and then you have to pay more than they say. That is what I feel in Guatemala that they get many obstacles to the people from Central America. They make it difficult to avoid people leaving legally.

Miguel: So, you immigrated to Southwest Kansas because your husband lived here?

Leslie: Yes.

Miguel: Okay, when you came to the United States, what was your experience once you received your visa, your documents, and you were ready to travel, what can you tell me about that trip as an immigrant?

Leslie: Well, at first I was happy, but the only thing that I had as a barrier was the English because I could not communicate. When I arrived at the airport in Houston, I had to give to them the papers that they gave me. I had to give the papers there at immigration. But it is something that you are speaking one language without being able to understand, and with that difficulty, the people from immigration told me where I had to go, and I didn't understand how to fill out the forms to enter and once here to communicate or go to someplace, that is what has been a barrier, let's say. I got an application to work at the plant, and I felt that there was a little bit of discrimination. And with English because they got an interpreter, then they told me that there was no work for me, and I realized that when I said that I had started, let's say, almost one half of my career in law school, and there was like an obstacle, I was told that there was not work for me. They asked me if I understood what the job was about, working with the knives, in a cold area, and that was the only thing available, and that there was no work for me. Practically, I feel that that is discrimination that they sometimes take people without papers to a level of exploitation. I feel that many people for not having their papers, they settle for little because they cannot communicate, there are many Guatemalans here whose language is Mayan because in Guatemala there are forty-two dialects, and many times they are not able to communicate like how shall I say, many barriers that they have to face and because of fear they don't do it. I realize that they go to the store and because they don't know the exchange rate, many people laugh or make fun of them.

Miguel: Are you talking about Guatemala or here?

Leslie: Guatemala. Let's say here in the United States because in Guatemala we go and we can communicate with the people, or we go to anyplace. It is our language what we are speaking, but here I realize that it is not the same thing. To the people who speak like, let's say, a dialect, it is more difficult for them to communicate because they don't speak English, and to me that also has been a barrier. Something that even when I studied and with the people that I am with at school, I realize that some of them have professional careers, but here it is worthless because when I ask if I could get my GED, but because of the fact that I am studying English, I have to take it in English and also the fact that I have to retake my career, and what I studied has no value here. I don't know if they do it for fear because certain person overcoming them, but I believe that we all should have the same opportunity. I sometimes realize and I have talked to classmates about the way they came and about the risks that they took, the same thing in Mexico or in Central America. I think that they should, or the government of the United States, Central America, and Mexico should get in a dialogue to see what can be done so that all these people do not take so many risks like many people who are here, they ask others to bring their children, and the children get lost or they take their money or women are abused.

Miguel: Do you know people who have been through those experiences?

Leslie: Yes, I have heard about many people, and I know people that tell me about how they came, but many times women don't talk because of shame, embarrassment, and I think it is time that the government of Mexico or all the governments from Central America and the United States would sit down in a way so that these people would stop taking these risks. I understand that because of the economy is what makes people move after the American dream because they are told that things are going to get better and, yes, it is true, the United States is a big country with many opportunities, but I feel that all those people are taking a lot of risks.

Miguel: When you came to the United States, you came by yourself? Or your children were with you?

Leslie: My children came with me.

Miguel: Are you currently working?

Leslie: No.

Miguel: Has it been difficult for you to find employment?

Leslie: Yes.

Miguel: I think that one of the reasons is that you are overqualified, you have more education, more experience than what is required. It is a problem not to have experience and not to have an education, but it is also a problem when you have it more than required. You have almost to guess it right.

Leslie: Yes.

Miguel: As far as housing, I believe you didn't have any problems because your husband already had housing ready for when you came.

Leslie: Thank God we are not renting. We live in our own house.

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

Leslie: Communication because sometimes I have to go or my husband helps me. If we go to someplace or I have to pay something, he tells me to go ahead, or when I try to communicate in English, I can't. And many times I hesitate to speak even in Spanish because I get very nervous, and I realize that that happens not only to me. Sometimes we don't know what they are telling us, and sometimes I tell him or he says, "Try to understand," but it is very hard because it is a language that when we were little in Guatemala, we communicated with our parents in Spanish and trying to learn another language feels like something difficult.

Miguel: So, can you summarize a little bit what was your experience with the immigration authorities?

Leslie: It was good here in the United States because they helped me. It was to the contrary to what many people say that they abuse or they are disrespectful, but to me it was very good because when I showed them my papers, they told me to go to another place. They gave me directions where I had to go down and where I had to go in. When I went to the interview, at any time I felt bad. They only asked me if I spoke Spanish, and there was an interpreter when I went to get the employment authorization. Once I received my residency, thank God, I felt good. I didn't feel discriminated from their part.

Miguel: And what has been your experience as far as teachers and schools in this country?

Leslie: It is very good. I realize that they give a lot of opportunity like for example, at the ones where my children are receiving their education, they have been given also a lot of opportunities by the teachers. Thank God, they are helping them in English. They take almost the majority of the classes so that they can learn English. They get good grades. At first it was difficult. At the school where I am attending, the teacher helps us a lot. Although she is American, we can understand her.

Miguel: What has been your experience with the police? Have you ever had any problems with police in this country?

Leslie: No, never.

Miguel: Have you ever experienced any incidents or racism from the Americans towards you?

Leslie: Only when I applied for work at the plant and they made me feel a little bit bad.

Miguel: Since you have been in the United States, have you been back to your country?

Leslie: No.

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

Leslie: Yes.

Miguel: In what way?

Leslie: Well, just by communicating, and financially.

Miguel: Do you send money to your native country?

Leslie: Yes. Not constantly, but sporadically.

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

Leslie: No, I don't think so.

Miguel: Let's talk a little about expectations and reality. What were your ideals and your dreams about the United States before you came? What is what you expected? Or what were your dreams about this country

Leslie: Well, they always talked that there was some discrimination towards the Hispanics, but I have always thought that we cannot speak until we are in front of the problem or in the problem, and when the only expectation was to improve or get better because I had been told that it is a country with a lot of opportunities and the opportunity to even sometimes help people from Central American, and in some way they communicate and also, I'm not sure if in any way Immigration could give people a little bit more opportunity because I feel that the way they come, they take a lot of risks. Many don't make it. Many suffer accidents, and many die in the attempt.

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

Leslie: I don't dislike anything because what I have seen about the Americans is that they don't look down on anyone. I have always realized that they don't make fun of persons or the way they talk, that is something that we do, the Hispanics, among ourselves because some get to learn English and others are still learning, and the ones who know make fun. But there are also times that the Americans want to learn Spanish, and they make fun of the way they talk. I feel that it is other Hispanics who limit the others so that they don't get better or do not make any progress here in the United States.

Miguel: In what way is the United States similar or different from your country?

Leslie: It is totally different. My country is a little behind, let's say to the departmental level and whatever is related to education, people have difficulties in accessing health because of the distance. There are no roads sometimes or means or ways of communication so that they can progress. My country is unfortunately behind, so far behind, for example, the unemployment rate. There is a lot of crime because many businesses went bankrupt. And that has increased also the insecurity.

Miguel: What aspect of American society has been the most difficult to adjust to and in what way have you adjusted?

Leslie: Well, that aspect is the English. I have tried by studying.

Miguel: What has been the easiest aspect in this society that you have adjusted to?

Leslie: Well, the easiest has been the ways or means of transportation. Although most of the time I am with my husband. He has helped me a lot as far as communication, or he translates to me. He tells me what they are saying or what I have to do, that is the only thing.

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

Leslie: More secure.

Miguel: Why is that?

Leslie: Because I feel that I can go out. I know that we can stop at the stoplight and we will not be robbed. If we are on the street with a cellular phone or jewelry, we know that we will not be killed or we won't be killed to take our cell phone away.

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

Leslie: A lot.

Miguel: In what ways?

Leslie: Well, for example, as far as the food, it is lots better here because in Guatemala, for example, they export the best over here. They bring it here. What is harvested, they bring it here, and in Guatemala they keep what is lower quality. That is what the Guatemalans have access to. Sometimes they increase the price, and even when it is low quality, it is still expensive for families according to their salaries in Guatemala.

Miguel: If you have the opportunity to talk to someone from your country thinking about immigrating to the United States, what advice would you give them?

Leslie: I would tell them to get their papers and come legally so that they won't have to take any risks, and also if they bring children, because children are at a bigger risk and women as well, because sometimes they are abused, same thing with children. I recently saw in the news that some children got lost. Their parents asked somebody to bring them over. I think the parents are Mexicans, and they got lost, and they didn't know, and the parents did not know if the children had made it or not. I would tell them to get their papers fixed legally from any country, Guatemala, Central America, or Mexico, and don't take any risks.

Miguel: If the President of the United States invited you to serve in a committee on immigration, what suggestions would you give him to improve the immigrant experience? What would you suggest to the President of the United States?

Leslie: Well, the first thing I would suggest was to get together with the presidents of Central American and Mexico and sit down to have a dialogue and to find out any possible way for people to stop taking so many risks because like around this time temperatures are going rise, and I understand that many people are dying in the desert. I feel it is very necessary because those people are valuable for their relatives. They are waiting for them. They want them back in their countries. As to just get lost, they are human beings. I feel that they do not deserve to die or take so many unnecessary risks.

Miguel: Any other suggestions that you would make to the president?

Leslie: Well, to the government of Mexico or Central America to find ways to generate more jobs because that is what makes people to migrate. We also should fight violence. That's also what makes people to migrate here. Violence and so many other things that we see and kidnappings in Mexico and Central America.

Miguel: Let's talk a little about national identity. You came relatively not too long ago. Maybe over time you will become a citizen like many other people. In this moment, do you consider yourself as an American, Guatemalan, or both?

Leslie: Well, both, because when there is discrimination towards Guatemalans, it bothers me to a certain degree, and the same towards Mexicans, but when I am among Americans, I feel like them. I feel that there is no difference.

Miguel: Do you consider it important to maintain your national identity as a Guatemalan?

Leslie: In a way, yes. It would be, for example, when people talk about the country of Guatemala, well, it has

many pretty things. The forty-two dialects throughout the departments. Many people are professionals, but they are not given the opportunity that they should have.

Miguel: And in what ways since you have been in the United States have you tried to maintain that national identity?

Leslie: Well, right now, not in any particular way, but if people ask me how is Guatemala, I talk about Guatemala. Sometimes people ask me advice about traveling. I tell them that there are areas that are dangerous, and I leave it up to them to make the decision whether they want to take the risk to travel to those places because I am not going to lie to them that in Guatemala there is not violence.

Miguel: As an immigrant living in the United States, what do you consider to be your biggest challenges?

Leslie: Professionally, well, I think about improving and speak English and try to help others or other people who think that they do not have the opportunity to get better, but the United States gives us the opportunity to get better. It even gives us the opportunity to learn their language and to feel part of them, and also food is provided to people who come. Sometimes they provide medication and clothing for people who come. But there are times when some who try to take advantage, but I realize that the United States has a lot of opportunities. I will tell other Hispanics not to abuse or take advantage of those opportunities but to leave it to the ones who really need it because there are times when the ones who need it don't get it.

Miguel: Do you think that American society and education in this country in general should adopt bilingualism?

Leslie: Yes, I think so because at the world level, we are all the same, although with different languages, we would be able to communicate better either Japanese or Mexicans or people from Central America or the United States or Germans. It would be good that all of us learn different languages so that we could communicate better.

Miguel: Do you think that police should end the practice of racial profiling? What they call racial profiling, for example, stop somebody because he is a Hispanic or African American?

Leslie: I think so. Because I have seen sometimes that they beat the ones who are African Americans or they look down on them. It doesn't mean that they are all the same. That one is a criminal doesn't mean that all the others are criminals.

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

Leslie: Well, it would be like nobody is going to feel what another person feels, but until they get to that point, we will have to be in that situation. We need to think and feel in our hearts what immigrants feel, to feel what we feel, so that Americans feel exactly what is happening and what we are living through.

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

Leslie: Sometimes I think that it is becoming less hospitable, and sometimes I think that they are right because of what we are going through in the world about the terrorist attacks. I think that in a way, they are building barriers to the Hispanics because in a way that limits Hispanics because they are judging everybody the same. They are judging many Hispanics as terrorists. It is that one person wants to improve his quality of life; it is not because he wants to harm the United States. Many who remain here have improved and they come to work. I cannot say that everybody because we are not exactly the same although it is not for the purpose of harming the United States.

Miguel: It has been a very interesting interview. I thank you for that a lot. You are an example that not all people who come to this country lack an education. There are many people who are educated, and they are professionals like you, and they are positive people who want to get better. I thank you very much. Is there anything else that you would like to add or any other comments about your experience as an immigrant?

Leslie: I think that that is all and thank you for the opportunity you gave me for this interview