

Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

Interview with Miguel Giner

July 14, 2005

Interviewer Jack Cooley

Jack: Miguel, what is your name?

Miguel: My name is Miguel Giner, G... Well, actually it's pronounced Gin-er, but here it is anglicized and so here it is more like Ginner or Giner. Some people say Giner, but in Spanish we say hee-ner.

Jack: What's your date of birth?

Miguel: My date of birth is April 10, 1963.

Jack: Where were you born?

Miguel: And I was born in Camargo in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico.

Jack: And your race or ethnicity?

Miguel: I'm a Hispanic for purposes of the census bureau in that, I am Hispanic.

Jack: What would you be called in Mexico?

Miguel: Mexican, yes one more citizen, one more in the crowd.

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

Miguel: Officially?

Jack: Officially.

Miguel: I have one sister, the total of us is four siblings. The oldest is my sister she is fifty...like fifty-one, I have an older brother he's around forty six or so and I'm forty-two and my youngest brother he is 38.

Jack: When you said officially...

Miguel: No. Well, that's what we know officially...we don't know if there are more.

Jack: Okay.

Miguel: I'm just kidding.

Jack: Are your parents still alive?

Miguel: Only my mother. My father died in 1999, and she lives back in my hometown of (name of town).

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

Miguel: Well, beside my mother, my youngest brother and his family. He's married and he has a family. Now my sister is also living there in Chihuahua, other than that a lot of uncles and aunts, cousins, extended family. I come from a huge family on both sides of my family.

Jack: What was your occupation in your native country?

Liberal Memorial Library received an \$8,000 Kansas Humanities Grant to record the immigration stories of immigrants to Southwest Kansas. The Grant titled "Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community" will record and preserve the stories of 40 individuals and/or families who immigrated to Southwest Kansas from a foreign country.

The grant dollars from the Kansas Humanities Council allowed the library to record the interviews with both video and audio equipment and disseminate the information obtained during the interviews through our website and DVD recordings. Preserving the stories of immigrants to Southwest Kansas is important for many reasons, and if we do not begin to record them soon, the stories will be lost as families move on or individuals pass away.

Miguel: Right before I came I worked for the state of Chihuahua at the office of development. I was a...I was the aid to state representative at one time. I was a teacher, history, a history teacher at one time. I taught at the same school I got my psychology degree, but right before I came to Kansas I was working for the state of Chihuahua in Municipal development.

Jack: *So and what was your salary?*

Miguel: I think back then it was probably close to probably three or four hundred dollars a month, which wasn't bad. It was fair.

Jack: *What would consider your living conditions at that time, lower, upper?*

Miguel: Average.

Jack: *Average?*

Miguel: Average, because I don't...I don't come from a wealthy family but also my father had the opportunity to go to college he was an engineer and we had an average life like most people in Mexico. The basic amenities you know. We didn't live in a shack, but we didn't live in a mansion either. It was, it was an average home.

Jack: *What's your religion?*

Miguel: Catholic. I was raised and I'm a Catholic but I'm a bad Catholic because I don't go to church very often.

Jack: *I'll talk to your daughter and see if she'll work on you. When you were in Mexico were you ever subjected to harassment...{Jack fades out}*

Miguel: No, not myself I didn't, but I also know a lot of stories a lot of cases people that have been at some point in time people that were against the government were subjected to prison or torture. I'm friends with some of them, some of them have died. I know that has happened. Not in my case, but I know that it's been part of Mexican history.

Jack: *We're going to go to the immigration experience. When did you first learn about America?*

Miguel: I've been thinking about that a lot. I remember I was probably about five or six years old, my father was working in the highway construction business. He brought us, he brought me and my brother and one of his co-workers another engineer and his children. We came to what I now realize was Presidio, Texas. IT was probably the summer of 1968 or 69. It was....I remember that it was very, very, very hot and we drove on this dirt road for hours and hours and hours, but when we got to Presidio, I remember that we were, all kids were on the back of the truck, pickup truck in over one-hundred degree temperature and we stopped and this man asked the adults for some kind of ids and now I realize it was their passports, and we all kids we didn't have anything. We didn't have passports and then we came across the border to this town of Presidio and we went into one of the stores and they had the...the had these air coolings and it was cool and it was nice in the store after we have been riding in one-hundred degree temperatures and that is, that was my first encounter with, my first experience with the United States. I remember that that was the store where the sold milky ways and Hershey bars and we didn't have any of that in my hometown. We had other type of candy, but that was my earliest experience with my first encounter with this country back in the late sixties.

Jack: *What lead you to move to Southwest Kansas?*

Miguel: Before I came in 1992, like I said I was working for the state government, there was a change in the administration, the administration finished and the next governor, usually they change personnel, they bring their own people, and before I was terminated my ex-wife suggested she had always wanted to move to the United States and she had a brother living in Great Bend and so I went along with the idea. We decided not to move to Texas or New Mexico because most people are always bilingual and we didn't want to go farther north because we'd be too far if we wanted to go back to Chihuahua, it would be a long drive and so Kansas was kinda like in the middle, not too far and not too close. My brother-in-law lived already here and we moved to Great Bend in 1992, we moved to Topeka two

years later in 1994 and when I finished my graduate degree, my masters degree I came back to this part of the state to practice to be a clinical social worker, knowing that there was a lot of Hispanics, a lot of Spanish speaking people and there was a need bilingual mental health professionals and that was like a gold mine to me. That's what brought me here.

Jack: So did you have a lot of trouble getting your papers and stuff to get across. Since you were a professional was it easier than most cases?

Miguel: What happened was because I was married to a US citizen she applied to get me a green card I did have to get my back wet or have to hire a (coreolta) or anything like that. I got it pretty easy, I got it pretty easy. She applied to get me a green card, my ex-wife and so when I came we came legally and I've been legal all along.

Jack: Where did your ex-wife live before she moved to Chihuahua?

Miguel: She lived in the border town of Ohenaga, to be exactly it's right across from Presidio. She was raised there and she lived there when we met and got married.

Jack: Was it hard finding employment?

Miguel: As far as employment, we lived in Great Bend and I was going to go and apply like most Mexicans, or immigrants at the packing plant in Great Bend, but when I went to enroll the children in school, the principal offered me a job knowing about my background and that I was a little bit bilingual. He saved me from going to work in the packing plant. It was not hard and I worked for the school for two years. As far as housing, when we came my brother-in-law had already found a house for us. We didn't have a hard time with that.

Jack: Was it difficult to...for adjustments. Could you describe some of the adjustments you had to make when you came?

Miguel: It's hard it's not just getting the papers, the immigration papers, it's not just finding work. There is a lot things, language for example. People I think that most immigrants even when we have to interact or we have any sort of contact with local people, especially with Anglos, something goes wrong and immediate we think we have been discriminated and that is not case. So it took me a long time to realize that not everything has to do with discrimination. If it is just what we think. As far as little adjustments, yes, things are done different, very different. Here you can trust police for example. You don't have to...well you just cannot bribe the police to let you go. There is a lot of adjustments. Getting use to the idea of celebrating the local holidays and sometimes no longer your traditional holidays. Sometimes you celebrate both, but getting use to what is done here. It's a little bit hard. Being away from the family, the extended family being away from society, a culture that was totally familiar here is almost like learning to read or write or begin from scratch to get use to how things are done.

Jack: Miguel I know you were a big part of the Cinco de Mayo celebration in Great Bend, did that help you adjust and others, what you started?

Miguel: That was a lot of fun, ya. The following year after I came to Great Bend, the principal and another co-worker and myself started organizing the Cinco de Mayo, for that purpose to help people feel more, more part of the community. Also Great Bend, Kansas doesn't have anything to do with Cinco de Mayo and the French invasion to Mexico, but there is a large Mexican population in Great Bend and through the celebration we wanted people to feel more at home, more at ease like. The celebration is also part of what it is Great Bend now. Yes I was involved in that.

Jack: What has been your experience with immigration or naturalization? Has it been good or bad?

Miguel: It has been positive. I cannot complain. I think they do...do...the times that I have had to interact with them I didn't have any problem. My experience...I think that they are doing their jobs and other people don't feel that, but that's because they've been subjected to other types of experiences. I don't have any problems with that.

Jack: I'd like to proceed just a little bit further. Is the expense quite a bit to start getting your papers?

Miguel: Is not the monetary cost that is the expense, it is the...that you have to qualify. There are certain categories in order to be able to apply for residence, a resident card, resident alien or a citizenship. The cost of the application, there is a set fee for that. I think that it some thing around \$200 or \$300, which is nothing compared to the benefits, but you have to meet certain criteria, be a first degree relative, be the child or the spouse or the parent to a legal resident or a U.S. citizen. That is the real question.

Jack: *So the price that we hear on others of \$2500, \$3000 is like going through a lawyer?*

Miguel: Yes. That's mostly is going to lawyer's fees with the exception of fines, people who get fined for having crossed illegally at some point and when they are in the process of becoming legal, they have to pay a fine, I think it was or it is about \$1000 fine. But not everyone has to pay that.

Jack: *You said that you worked with a school system in Great Bend, what was your experience with teachers with your children, but also your working?*

Miguel: Well, it was very different from what I had seen all my life because in Mexico although education is a priority for the government, but I never saw an elementary school in Mexico with carpet on the floor. I never saw so much supplies, all the amenities that they have here. Teachers it's like any other profession, you find all sorts, good teachers, not so good teachers, teachers that really care, the teachers that really love their jobs, and there are teachers that haven't had that experience, as far as dealing with immigrant, migrate children, or non-English speaking students. I...that job gave me the opportunity to know the system a little bit more. I worked with the principals, I worked with other teachers, I worked with families, part of what I did was be the liaison between the migrant families and the school district.

Jack: *That's very progressive for a school district, isn't it?*

Miguel: Ya, and I'm still friends with the...who was back then the principal, we're still friends. Well, he's the one that saved me from going to the packing plant, well anyway, but he was very supportive of the Cinco de Mayo festivity. He was very supportive of migrant families. He wasn't (inaudible).

Jack: *You were talking about the police and how they are honest, has it been pretty positive with the law enforcement agencies up here compared to what it is down there?*

Miguel: Well, yes. It is difficult to compare salaries are way different here. Generally here society is more law abiding. You know that you are going to get justice sooner or later. It is more difficult to corrupt a judge here or a police officer. My experience has been positive with them. I've never had any problems. In fact I work close with them sometimes because of my job, with the law enforcement agencies, with the judicial system. In Mexico I never had problems because my family had connections and my brother he works for the Attorney General, but a lot of people do have a lot of problems being harassed, tortured, but here my experience has been mostly positive with law enforcement.

Jack: *Miguel, when you're around us Anglos, have you experienced racism here?*

Miguel: I...I cannot say, I cannot give you one example and say I was a victim or I was treated this way because I am Mexican. I just can't. A lot of people, I know a lot of stories I know a lot of people that say we didn't get this or this, or treated this way because we're Mexicans, and I know a lot of case, but I cannot say that I've been...I have got that feeling maybe a couple of times but I cannot say objectively. I cannot say I cannot go back and say you are discriminating against me because I'm brown or I'm Mexican. I cannot say that, but a lot of people almost convinced me and say yes we've been discriminated because we are different.

Jack: *How many times have you been back to your homeland since you've been here?*

Miguel: Last year I went like five times I think. I go every time I can and that's one of the reasons I moved to Liberal because it's closer to the border. It's six, six and a half hours between here and Topeka and that six and a half hours that I don't have to drive one way if I want to go to Chihuahua for example, but I go every time that I can.

Jack: *What is it, ten hours to El Paso?*

Miguel: El Paso's close to 10 hours, or 12 hours to Presidio for example. And past, if I go through Presidio I drive two and a half hours, three more hours and I will be in my hometown. I go every time I can.

Jack: *Ya, that's really cool. You maintain your contact with people back in your hometown?*

Miguel: Definitely, friends, family, yes.

Jack: *Through email, phone, letters.*

Miguel: I use to be a very good letter writer, but since electronic mail came about...that's part of the history of the past, but by email everyday, by phone not as often, but by email it's a daily thing with friends, former co-workers, family, yes.

Jack: *Do you think you'll ever go back there to stay?*

Miguel: To Mexico. I think that's...that's every immigrant's dream. There was a time when I was one hundred percent sure I'd go back, yes, now I'm getting more use to the idea that well maybe...maybe I will, maybe I won't. I don't know. When I go...when I go back I think I suffer the same shock when I first came. Here you can do things, you do things one way and then you get use to that. You can pay your bills by phone, by electronic mail, by check. You can pick up the phone and you can get everything. When you go to Mexico you have to wait in line for hours and then if you don't have the exact amount you have to come back the following day or the postage gets lost or they won't take your check. There is a lot of...so there are many, many conveniences here that we still don't have in Mexico and when I go back I have to be more patient and then wait in line and the way people drive like interesting ways, and that makes me hesitate and sometimes I think, do I really want to come back to here, and go through this jungle. But I might.

Jack: *What were your dreams and ideals about America?*

Miguel: I think that my dreams were just about make it. Earn a decent living and support my family. Later I realized that I didn't have to have a Godfather to get a job. I realized that my qualifications were enough to get me a decent job, but in Mexico you have to have connections. It's not what you know, but who you know that gets you a job.

Jack: *So if I'm understanding you, that's what the freedoms all about? When you're recognized for yourself and your abilities.*

Miguel: I....

Jack: *That's freedom itself?*

Miguel: Yes. I don't have to depend on whether my compadre or my Godfather is in a good mood to write me a letter of recommendation. Here I can go and apply and go through the interview and hiring process and if I'm qualified I can get it and I can move to another job and do the same thing. I don't have to depend on others.

Jack: *What do you dislike about American society? I mean...*

Miguel: That it is freedom it's all over the place. The words freedom, democracy, justice, but after all these years, after all these struggles the civil rights movement and legislation to end discrimination the huge budgets that the governments spend on defense for example, instead of getting people out of poverty, despite all the efforts and the money and the legislations, you still see a lot of poverty you see that not everyone is getting the equal treatment. There is still a long way. It is a melting pot, it's a beautiful, wonderful country, but not everybody is getting the same opportunity. There is still a lot of people falling through the cracks. Yet, this is the world leader in civil rights and democracy and freedom, but in-house there is still a lot to be done. That's what I...it's not that I dislike it but I don't agree with that.

Jack: *That's a very good point, Miguel. (inaudible) What's similar (inaudible)*

Miguel: Like somebody said, somebody told me, what's similar. Well, there is a lot of Mexicans here on both sides. We're taking over. What's similar? There is not a lot of similarities I think. There are more

differences, culturally, linguistics, lifestyles, freedoms. The typical cultural manifestations holidays, although like we said there are many places that they celebrate Cinco de Mayo and they celebrate Hispanic holidays and Christmas holidays, the Hispanic way.

Jack: You don't have Thanksgiving down there do you?

Miguel: We don't have a Thanksgiving. That is correct. Well, I think that sorta in revenge. If you don't celebrate Mexican Independence, we're not going to have a Thanksgiving.

Jack: You've got the day of the dead like we have Halloween.

Miguel: We have our own version of Halloween, yes.

Jack: I'm sorry...if you have the opportunity to speak to someone who is planning to immigrate, what advice would you give them?

Miguel: Well, if...if I had the opportunity to talk to people wanting to immigrate I would tell them to try to do it the right way if at all possible and avoid the doing the illegal way because that puts them at risk of many awful things. I would advise people to do it legally if they can, even if they do illegally try to follow the law of the land. Show respect for the local culture and how things are done here. I think that some people...it takes a long time before some people realize things are done different here and I think I'd tell people this is not...it use to be Mexico at one time in history, but it's not Mexico anymore like Dorothy said, "We're not in Kansas anymore" and a lot of people need to realize we're not in Mexico anymore and things are done different here and be aware of that.

Jack: You're very thoughtful Miguel, if President Bush called you up and asked you to serve on the immigration committee, can you think of some suggestions for the INS? You might...you've seemed to have thought this out pretty good.

Miguel: Oh my. Well, what would I tell President Bush? Don't use immigration as a political weapon to beat on other countries. I think that the issue of immigration is not used right. I think the US immigration policy needs to be more liberal like they do in Europe rather than encouraging or allowing people to live the underground, immigration law needs to be reformed more realistically and allow people to pursue their dream and follow the law rather than continue in the underground. I tell you it's a very current topic and I will have to give it more thought what I would tell the president, but one of the things I think that needs to be immigration law needs to be more liberal and allow people to come more freely and people who follow the law, let them stay and other people don't just pay the consequences of that, so that we can maintain a balance.

Jack: That's a very good point that you've got. We've got free trade and all that and we should be able to move back and forth between all countries. I agree. Do you see yourself as an American or nationality of our country of origin or both? What do you see yourself as?

Miguel: I was thinking about that question today. I think that I will always be a Mexican first. When I became a US citizen, I wasn't afraid that my eyes were going to turn blue or my hair was going to turn blonde, but no it didn't happen. I'll always...I will always be a Mexican, also I was thinking about that in what ways am I an American, and I think the way that I try to obey the law and the way I try to follow the principles, the culture of this country, I always will be a Mexican with a little bit of American. Although it doesn't show very much.

Jack: So you do feel it is important to hold your national identity?

Miguel: That's who I am, that's where I came from. Ya, cultural Identity is important because that's who we are.

Jack: You seemed to have answered this question already; I'm going to ask it again. In what ways have you attempted to integrate into American society? (inaudible)

Miguel: Well, how we integrate, how we attempt to integrate learning the language, becoming involved with society, participating from parent teacher conferences to other groups or organizations, being part of the community that's part of how I've been trying to integrate. Just do the things that the local people

do and not stay isolated.

Jack: You seemed to evolved really well, what are your challenges now. I mean it seems like you've mastered most of those.

Miguel: I think... I think that my challenges are I feel that I'm running out of time. There are still many things that I want accomplish, but twenty four hours a day are not enough. I want to further my education, I want my daughter going to college, I want to get to the point of not having to work, and still have a decent living. So what I'm doing is I'm trying to get prepared and get a better job every time that will allow me to have a decent living with I can no longer work. Those are part of my challenges.

Jack: Let me ask you about bilingualism. Should we generally foster it?

Miguel: I agree I think so, yes. I have have friend from Europe who speak three of four different languages. I have a friend in Switzerland, I met her many years ago and she was a waitress and she spoke German, French, English and Spanish, and she was only a waitress. I'm not saying it's bad to be a waitress, but she was a multi-lingual. Very fluent in all four. I know other friends and these people just move like a fish in the water wherever they go. I think it gives people a different prospective of the world when they speak more than one language. I think it should be adopted not bilingualism, but multilingualism because we have people coming from all countries and that's part of learning different cultures, learning their language. I think that sticking to English only narrows your perspective on things... it doesn't allow you to see more than just one view, one perspective on things.

Jack: Miguel, some things have happened in the last weeks, the last couple years, September 11th, what do you think of racial profile? Should they end it, should they start it or should they end it or pretty well, what do you think of racial profiling?

Miguel: Well, personally I never believed in something like that. The very, very, very few times I've been stopped by the police it's because I was over speeding or my child didn't have a seatbelt or something like that. But I've never been stopped by police because I'm Hispanic or I'm brown. However many people say that that's the reason...and it's very easy for people to say they stopped me because I'm not white, but the truth is they had an expired tag, they had no lights or...and then the officer finds out they didn't have insurance or they're driving with an expired license but it's easy for...let's say Hispanics for example, they pulled me over because I'm Hispanic. They don't want to admit that Yes, I'm breaking the law. It's easy for them to blame the officer or say it's racial profiling. If it's happens, it should stop because I don't think it's fair. I don't know if it happens in this town. I'm not aware, but people will tell all the time ya they pulled us over because we are Hispanics or Mexicans or this or that color, but I don't think that is always the case.

Jack: I'd like to ask you this question. Are us Anglos in America becoming more hospitable or staying...

Miguel: I think that given the present circumstances it's becoming less...the country the society in general is becoming more guarded, more defensive because what we have seen in the last few years. There are more restrictions to immigrate it is more difficult to get into the country and in once you're in the country there is this constant suspiciousness where are you from, what do you do, why are you here? It was difficult in the past for many people, now it is more difficult. I feel like people from the Middle East or Muslims I think that the country is becoming less hospitable, unfortunately. Not what it used to be.

Jack: Since 9-11.

Miguel: Since then it has been more difficult since then.

Jack: But was it starting to be less hospitable even before 9-11, even for folks here in Kansas?

Miguel: I think it was getting better. I think that the melting pot was still the melting pot. Because we had not seen the 9-11 incident and as a result of that it became harder, more difficult. If that had not happened I think that the United States would have been on the same, on the same path of welcoming people from different countries.

Jack: Do you have anything else that you would like to add or anything, like anything on religion, or food or

dress...anything? Is there anything you would like to this?

Miguel: I think that I'm lucky. I'm very fortunate person for being in this town and I have made very good friends like yourselves. I feel part of this community already. When I came I never thought that I would be so involved and I would get to meet so many interesting people. I'm glad to be in this part of Kansas. I'm going to leave eventually. I don't know when yet, but when the time comes maybe I'll just change my mind and decide to stay. But for now I'm glad to be in this....but it reminds me that was Mexico in one time in history, not anymore politically, but culturally it's becoming a little Mexico...

Jack: But it's nice.

Miguel: And I'm part of that. I'm glad to be here