

Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

Interview with Rafael Diaz

Interviewer Miguel Giner

Miguel: Can you tell me what your name is, please?

Rafael: My name is Rafael Diaz Lozada

Miguel: And what is your date of birth, Rafael?

Rafael: The 30th of September, 1962.

Miguel: Where were you born at?

Rafael: In the city of Santiago de Cuba.

Miguel: What is your race or ethnicity?

Rafael: Latino.

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

Rafael: I have two brothers, the oldest is forty-five and the youngest is forty.

Miguel: Your parents are still alive?

Rafael: My father died, but my mother is still alive.

Miguel: When did your father die?

Rafael: He died in the year 1986.

Miguel: Where does your mother live?

Rafael: She lives in Havana, Cuba

Miguel: When your father was alive, what did he do?

Rafael: He worked in commerce. He had a grocery store.

Miguel: Among your family members, who still lives in your native country?

Rafael: Everybody except me.

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

Rafael: I studied electric engineering. I worked in a company of the iron and steel industry.

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

Rafael: I worked from summer of '87 until the year '97, exactly when I left the country.

Miguel: From what university did you graduate, Rafael?

Rafael: I graduated from the University of Oriente, in Santiago de Cuba

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.

Rafael: I earned about 300 Cuban pesos every month.

Miguel: How much would that be in US dollars?

Rafael: Exactly, I don't know what the conversion rate is at this time, but if we convert it now to 28 pesos for one dollar...

Miguel: More or less under \$15 a month.

Rafael: Possibly less than \$20.

Miguel: Can you tell me about your living conditions in your country?

Rafael: We lived very sparingly of many things. A lot of restrictions from the point of view of the person.

Miguel: What is your religion?

Rafael: We have always been in my family and I, we have always been Catholics.

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

Interpreter: Directly I never had any confrontation with the government, as such.

Miguel: Let's talk about your experience as an immigrant. When did you first hear about the United States? What is your earliest memory about this country?

Interpreter: My father always loved this country. He always liked the United States, and when we were little, he would talk to us about the good things in this country.

Miguel: What motivated you, or what brought you to settle in Southwest Kansas?

Rafael: I came specifically because of a job offer.

Miguel: Where do you currently work?

Rafael: I work at National Beef Packing.

Miguel: Do you remember when you migrated to the United States? What can you mention about that experience or that trip when you immigrated to this country?

Rafael: Well, it was something very exciting but sad at the same time. When you leave your family behind, when you leave your country, in our case Cuba, because see it difficult to go back compared to other countries, go back to see what we left behind, including our friends. It is a little bit sad.

Miguel: What means did you use to migrate to the United States? By what means did you come to the United States?

Rafael: I came because of a visa lottery, and I won a visa to come.

Miguel: How was it that you first found employment in the United States?

Rafael: I was still in Cuba when a cousin of mine talked to me about this company and said that they were needing electricians. I told him that if there was work, I would come, especially in my field.

Miguel: How did you first find housing in this country?

Rafael: At first I lived with relatives. I rented until I was able to buy my own house. With my savings, I bought my own house.

Miguel: Where was that that you lived with relatives? Was that here in Liberal?

Rafael: Yes, it was here in Liberal.

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

Rafael: In the first place, the language. The language because I had learned some very basic in English, but not specifically as to speak it fluent and have good communication with the others.

Miguel: And what has been your experience with the Immigration and Naturalization authorities in this country?

Rafael: Every time I have to make any procedures, I have done it in a way that everything is done the right way and I have always got a good service.

Miguel: What has been your experience with teachers and schools in this country?

Rafael: I have the best impression about the teachers we have here. They have always helped me.

Miguel: And as far as your experience with the police? Have you ever had any problems with police in this country?

Rafael: Well, so far I have not had any conflict. Not even a single ticket or traffic violation. So far, I haven't got any problems with them.

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

Rafael: I had that impression when I worked one time that the superintendent grabbed me by the collar of the shirt, and I felt sad because I saw that as a racist act.

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

Rafael: Yes, after I got my green card, I've been three times to visit my family.

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

Rafael: Yes. Definitely. I communicate by telephone mostly.

Miguel: Do you send money to your native country?

Rafael: Yes. I send to my daughters and my wife and my mother.

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

Rafael: If the current politics change, I think I would. I think that I would return.

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

Rafael: To find a developed country, a country with possibilities to have prosperity as far as the economy, to find a freedom of expression that I didn't have in my native country, that I had not had since I was born.

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

Rafael: I like the environment of optimism and development, but sometimes I see things that I see a little bit hypocritical with respect to society towards immigrants. That's what I don't like.

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

Rafael: I think that I politics they are totally opposite, and I do not know how they could be similar. I don't know in reality.

Miguel: What aspect of American society has been the most difficult to adjust?

Rafael: I always tried to be a social being, abide by the law, as long as it is logical and just. I always tried to adjust to that, and that is what I have done in this country, tried to respect the idiosyncrasy of other people because of their different origins. I tried to enjoy good things that this country has to offer, its idiosyncrasy. I have tried to adapt to it.

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

Rafael: Yes, I feel more secure here.

Miguel: Why?

Rafael: In fact, I do not have that pressure to which I felt obligated like as far as the military. I feel more free in that sense.

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

Rafael: Yes, I believe so.

Miguel: In what ways?

Rafael: I'm not a very ambitious person. Financially I have done much better with a more easy life at my own desire, more freedom with respect to my person.

Miguel: Are there restrictions as far as sending money to Cuba?

Rafael: Yes.

Miguel: Has that affected you?

Rafael: Yes, it does affect us because on both sides because restrictions always favor that some overcharge or paying the taxes or the cost of the transfer, and that directly affects us because what we have to send to the family, it will always be less.

Miguel: What is the amount that is allowed to send to Cuba from the United States?

Rafael: Nobody has told me directly how much is that, but you can send like \$300 every month. That's what the company that I usually use allows.

Miguel: What company do you use for that?

Rafael: Usually I use Western Union.

Miguel: And you have to pay a fee for that service?

Rafael: We pay a fee like, for example, \$25 for transfer. And then over there they give to the family 80% of that.

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

Rafael: The only thing that I would tell them was not to use a way that would put their life in danger, but if they could get in the manner of getting here, well they would be welcome here.

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?

Rafael: It is difficult at this moment to answer to that question because we would have to make a schedule of suggestions, not just as a superficial suggestion, and it would be difficult at this point.

Miguel: Let's talk a little about national identity. You told me that you became a US citizen, right? Do you consider yourself an American, or Cuban, or both?

Rafael: I have a lot of feeling for this country as an American citizen, and I also feel some love for this land that I left. I feel that I belong to both places, a citizen of both places.

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

Rafael: In regard to the Cuban?

Miguel: Yes, as Cuban. Do you maintain that identity? Do you consider it important to maintain that identity? Let's say in regards to your Cuban side.

Rafael: I think so, it is important because that was the land where I was born, and it is difficult to forget that despite the adjustment to the American citizenship. I think so; I think that it is important to maintain that.

Miguel: And in what way do you maintain that national identity as a Cuban? What do you do to maintain that identity?

Rafael: Personally, thinking the best about that land, wishing the best in the future. I do not wish its destruction or any damage to the country, prosperity, and that someday we will be equal.

Miguel: In what ways have you attempted to integrate to American society?

Rafael: I do not understand. Can you repeat the question?

Miguel: In what ways have you attempted to integrate to the rest of society? Let's say celebrating the holidays or learning the language.

Rafael: Of course, I am very interested in learning the language, as much as possible, the best I can. Yes, and like I said before, I can adapt to the idiosyncrasy, like the holidays of the north American people to experience the same feeling as everybody else, to be one more.

Miguel: What has been your experience as far as language, religion, food, clothing, or any other customs of the American society?

Rafael: Well, about the food, it is very funny because many things that I wanted to eat, it was really difficult to get. Nowadays, it is something so simple, and that is no longer a problem or a worry for me. As far as clothing, I have never been a follower of the fashion. I always dress in a very discreet and laid back fashion.

Miguel: And as far as religion?

Rafael: I keep the same religion as Catholic. I see that here there are many other religions. There is a lot of diversity.

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

Rafael: The language in the first place, I do not know if I will be able to practice what is my profession, to be recognized because that has been difficult because there are many local laws that prevent the foreigners from practicing their profession here, and I would like if possible to get the recognition of my career, the knowledge that I acquired during five years.

Miguel: Your engineering degree to be recognized?

Rafael: Or at least part of it as a technician because at this point I have been exploited as cheap labor. They are using my knowledge for very short money.

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

Rafael: I think that the language should always be the same throughout the country, English. It would be interesting if schools would give the possibility of learning more than one language. That would be something interesting for society. It shouldn't be seen as a problem that in one school they are teaching more than one language, not like if that was an ethnic problem or not to consider that as a problem in transforming society. English has always been and should be the national language. If they recognize another language, it would be something big for society, more culture.

Miguel: Do you consider that police should end the practice of racial profiling? Have you heard of racial profiling, for example, to stop somebody because he is Hispanic or African American?

Rafael: Absolutely that shouldn't be. The police should only pursue social discipline in one single line without taking race into consideration. If a violation was committed regardless of the deed, what is that, to sanction or fine whoever did it.

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

Rafael: I believe that it is not exactly society but the social being that carries racism inside, and they get the rest of society involved when they have a position in politics or they are leaders in a given party. Sometimes it is not society; it is not the feeling of that society, but of the person, the social being. When they have the feeling of racism inside, they will take it to the workplace like it has happened so many times in this country. I do not say or blame this nation for being racist or that inspires racism. Simply, we have to detect what person and to educate that person so that he knows how to love others, independently from the color of their skin or the color of his eyes. That is my way of seeing the problem of racism in society.

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

Rafael: It is always noticeable; in fact, the North American people are hospitable. Its people have the custom of visiting other places, and they like to get the best impression, precisely because of the type of freedom that exists in this country. Anybody goes to anyplace in the world, and they share with other people, and when other people come here that are also exceptions, I wish that it is a hospitable society. It has changed or rather these have been measures after the problem on September 11th of terrorism. But these have been measures or organizational character, tactics to avoid incidents, as such.

Miguel: Rafael, is there any other situation or experience or anything else that you would like to add or comment regarding your experience as an immigrant?

Rafael: Indeed it has been something interesting in my life. I never thought that I would be able ever to get here, perhaps something that my father dreamed of or talked to me about. I truly feel happy at being here and being one more American, and I would like to give the best for this society.

Miguel: Did your father ever get to come to the United States or live in the United States?

Rafael: Never. He worked for some North Americans and that was always the impression that he kept, but he never got to set foot on the land of this country.

Miguel: Do you think about bringing your family to the United States?

Rafael: I would like to bring them despite the problems we are facing. My youngest daughter is having health problems, and she is not being allowed, but we are fighting to see if someday we could get them to recognize that she can also make it here, as well, and she will not harm anyone.

Miguel: Is there anything else, Rafael? Any other comments?

Rafael: I think everything is fine, so far.

Miguel: Thank you.