

Person Interviewed: Leonel Gordillo
Interviewed By: Anthony Grech

AG: Where were you born? How long did you live there and can you tell me a little about your family?

LG: I was born in Columbia, South America. I lived there for 26 years. Then I came here to the states. My family are all Colombians and they are still living there and some have passed away. I got a brother and sister that are living there.

AG: What was life like in your hometown?

LG: I lived the first 16 years in the countryside, working on a farm, but then I moved to a town that was destroyed by a volcano in 1985. Armero is not in existence anymore. It is like a regular town here in the states, you know, the culture background, the culture part, the young people do whatever the young people do except for certain restrictions. It is not that much freedom like the young people here.

AG: Where did you go to school and what was school like for you?

LG: I went to different schools. I went to different high schools in Columbia because of different scholarships. Most of my high school was from scholarships. You had to pay to go to private schools. I started in my home town and ended up finishing my high school in Caly Columbia. And I love school. School for me was great. I enjoyed every minute of it. The good thing there is that if you have a chance to go to high school than you are privileged. Not like hear where everyone has to go to school. You have a privilege to go to school and that is great. You do everything you can to go.

AG: What was your work in Columbia and were did you work?

LG: I worked in a farm, picking coffee beans and helping in a farm planting coffee plantation and cutting wood. Just farming.

AG: did you enjoy it?

LG: Most so. It was hard work. At the time, I was young and money wise I did not make much.

AG: How did you spend your free time?

LG: There was no free time. We worked all the time. In school we had free time. Really a free time for us was going to school. We did not have like you have here, a weekend, or because even on the weekend we had to take care of the

animals.

AG: What lead to your decision to leave Columbia? How long did you think about migrating before you did?

LG: I didn't take to long because I came on a scholarship to go to the Reform Bible College in Grand Rapids. I came to go to school.

AG: How did your family react to your leaving? Did you have any concerns about leaving?

LG: Ya, my parents at the time, they were not old but you know, just to leave your family is kind of hard especially parents and close brothers and sisters. It was kind of stressful because my mother was sick and you don't know when you go back, you know you think so many things when you leave home. You know especially one side of the world to another side is hard emotionally. Concerning them, it was hard for them because I was the oldest in the family.

AG: How did you decide to come to the U.S. rather than any other country? Why did you come to Holland?

LG: It was because I want to learn English. And I have seemed to learn English but I want to learn English more than any other language because English was something that really attracted me to learn. I studied in high school and being with missionaries, I tried to learn and when I came here my goal was to learn English really good. I still don't know really good and I hope one of these days I learn more and more, but it was learn English because the best books were in English and also for the education here. I could go to some Saco Sireka or something cause I want to have some schooling in the religious field and I decided to come to Grand Rapids.

AG: You got that scholarship you said. Did you get that scholarship in Columbia?

LG: I got a scholarship to the Reform Bible College. It is a scholarship fund that people contribute money for students there that come from other countries and the pay for certain amount, I work in the maintenance department in school to help pay for it.

AG: How did you get a visa to enter the U.S.? Were there legal issues that you had to deal with?

LG: No, for me, getting a visa was just a blessing. Number one because usually to get a visa it takes sometimes, especially from Columbia and other Latin American countries from 6 months to a year. I applied November 11th for my visa. I

went to the United States embassy and did all my paperwork. I had my physical and I was hoping to come in January. I started praying about it and I had a lot of friends praying about it and I applied November 11th and December 13th I got a letter from the embassy that my visa had been approved to come to the states. It was really quick. Then I went and had an interview with a counselor on the same day giving me the OK to leave January 13th.

AG: Would you say that you were primarily motivated to leave Columbia or to come to the U.S.?

LG: I think both, more to see the world. To see how the United States was. You had a different picture when you leave of the United States because of what you read and what you heard from people there from here.

AG: When did you actually make the trip to the U.S.? How did you come? Who else came with you if there were anybody and what were your reactions to the trip itself?

LG: I flew from Columbia here. I came alone. I came straight from Columbia to Chicago. It was fun. It was the second time I flew and I flew in, you know in a big airplane and it was nice.

AG: Do you remember the exact date?

LG: January 13, 1970.

AG: What were your first impressions of the U.S. and how did you react? What were your first impressions of Holland?

LG: You know it was interesting, the first thing that hit me was the temperature. I left home, my home town, that day at five O'clock in the morning it was 103 degrees, nice you know, know humidity at all. I came to the city here and it was sixty-nine degrees. I left from Miami and it was 72 and I came here to Chicago and it was snowing. It was a drastic change adopting to the cold. It was hard and it still is hard.

AG: What were your first impressions of Holland itself though?

L: Really Holland, I came to Grand Rapids to go to school. Really it was overwhelming. First of all cause I didn't know the language. When I came to states I could barely say good morning and how are you. You know I could not understand anything more than, I could not carry a conversation at all. I had to study English by myself outside the English classes they gave us in college. I have a friend of mine that is from Canada, he spoke clear English and there was offered a course in Spanish in our Reform

Bible College. We took a Spanish text book and we take tape 1500 feet of tape reel to reel in Spanish and English. He read it in English and I said it in Spanish. We took every single word in them and phrases and whatever and I sat about seven ours a day after my classes at night and listened and listened and write and listen and write. In about two and a half months, you know I could understand more and talk more, but it was hard. Talking about a little bit of a social shock, yes. Every kind of people here have a car. I mean you get to college and every college student has a car. It was, I could count on my fingers the college student who had a car. There cars is hard to get buy. You get a bicycle or you walk or you take a bus. Another thing, there is a abundance of things, I mean food, clothing, relationships with boys and girls you know, you never go out with a boy or a girl at home. You have to have a chaperon you know. They don't trust you (laughter). No, you know it is true, parents don't trust you. Here you jump in a car and go, go to a movie or out to eat. There you can't. You can't afford it and you don't have a car and in the meantime you don't do that.

AG: Where did you first work and how did you get the job?

L: I worked for the school just to pay for part of my schooling. That is the start of what I did during the years that I was here. I gone to school. I went back to Columbia back in 1973 after I graduated with my four year degree. I worked as a pastor at youth ministries in one of the Christian churches in town. I came back in 1973, at the end of 1973, then I started working as missionary, life saver. That was really the first job I had in English.

AG: That first job you had when you came here, with the school, was it really hard for you to work not knowing the English language that well?

L: Not really because most of what I did was, shovel side walks, snow plowing, in the summertime just taking care of the lawn and plants. It was not much brain work you know. They told me how to do it. By that time, by the time I started working I could understand.

AG: Were people in Grand Rapids excepting you as a immigrant and did you sense hostility from anyone?

L: At school, none. The Reform Bible College was a great place. Everybody helped me when I start. I see a lot of prejudice, and I always see a lot of prejudice. I always see a lot of prejudice when I go to the store in Grand Rapids or in any place. They look at you, and some times you stand up and here things. I here, here is another Mexican or here is another Spaniard. I was one time in a

store in Grand Rapids and I had coupons. Just coupons you cut from a paper. And I heard someone from the back saying, he probably is not working, he's cutting coupons to get a free meal. You find that it still is a prejudice, not only here in Holland, but in all places. I haven't traveled to that many countries, the United States, I have traveled to most of the states and you find a lot of prejudice and stuff. It is sad because I don't have any. I love everybody, I love what ever color it is and I treat as a human being. People don't understand.

AG: What specific events in your early years in Holland are most memorable to you and why are they important?

L: I think one of the things that has really struck me was the big Tulip time, the first time I saw it. It was really great. I never thought that people could come from all over the places, in the United States or even out of the United States to see a Tulip festival. Know that I am in Holland, I get out during Tulip Time, but that is just one of them. Another thing that attract me to Holland is that it is closest to a lake, you know it is something that brings a lot of attraction to Holland. I hope that was a good answer to that.

AG: What was the most difficult adjustment to you and were there any time in your first years in America that you considered returning to Columbia?

L: The adjustments, it was hard because I came to school without no other language. When you come on Wednesday. I came on Wednesday. I stayed in Chicago Thursday. Somebody drive me from Chicago to Reform Bible College in Grand Rapids on Friday. I spent a weekend and then on Monday I sit in class not understanding anything. It was a frustrating thing and day by day I was kind of loss you know because they were advancing in the material and every course and getting harder and I could not understand anything. I think that the hardest part for me was the first three months when I didn't know English. All English I could express myself. It like when you have gone to another country and all I could use was somebody to sit side by side and that person start speaking another language and you don't understand and you get frustrated. I think this was the greatest frustration I had in my life, but after that I started understanding English language and reading, listen to T.V., then it just became easier.

AG: Did you consider going back to Columbia and was it that stressful at some point?

L: No, I came here and made up my mind that I was not going to go back because I was going to make it. I stubborn enough

that when I make my mind, I will do it. This is what draw me to learn the language and finish school.

AG: Who were your friends when you first came to America? Did you know any other immigrants? Did you spend any time with them?

L: I have friends like from Canada. My best friend is from Canada. I had a friend from Greece that was going to Reform Bible College at that time. I had friends from Cuba. The school had a teacher that was a Cuban teacher and he introduced me to a lot of his friends, his relatives. I hang around at the beginning of the school with some of the Cuban girls and guys, but it was too much for me. I didn't have no time to waste. I had to study. I had to learn English and Study. I didn't have much time to.

AG: How have you kept in touch with friends and family back in Columbia?

L: By letter. I wrote them back and forth. We wrote back and forth.

AG: Did you write often?

L: Once a month. Sometimes it took me a couple of months, but I say no more than two months I wrote a letter back.

AG: Do you often call on the Telephone?

L: No, My family did not have a telephone there. See it a difference here, you can be in California and you can call your family you know, but in Columbia, my family didn't have a phone.

AG: Do you have Kids here?

L: Ya.

AG: Do you believe there is a difference in child rearing from the United States and Columbia?

L: Sure, there is a lot. The family structure in Columbia is more close than here. Also, the relationship between the father and the mother and the children are really close. The children could of stayed home and they want to stay home. They don't leave home right away after they finish high school or they are sixteen years old or whatever. They stay close to the home. Kind of watching the parents and helping the parents even though they get married they are still a little group there. It's a difference in a way that young people treat their parents. You worship to a certain extent the parents. The respect you have is unbelievable.

Right here in the states, you know that individual who respect parents has to be a real Christian young lady or young man. If not, parents are just like any other person and they treat them sometimes worse than a friend.

AG: In what ways is religious life here in Holland similar to religious life in Columbia and how was it different?

L: The worship is the same in certain Churches. The preaching, you know it depends on the denomination you are. I came in here to the Christian Reform Church where I was I became a Christian church. The churches over there are more alive. You know, more pep, not to the standard of a blown roof, but you know with the music and the screaming and stuff, but more emotional and here some there are now. Some don't. Christian is more exciting there. More applicable to your need. People here don't have much need. You know, they have need, but they don't have like people down there. They got cars, they got nice houses, they got books, they go, you know, down there they live depending on God. Here you depend on someone to hire you and do a job and make a good living. Down there, you depend on someone to hire you yes, but the amount of money you make is not much. I am not really sure, you know when I worked there, I worked in a factory down there. A furniture factory when I left home, when I was 16 years old. My father say, if you want to go to school, you have to leave home, and you have to work on a farm. Then I left home when I was sixteen and I worked in a factory and I was making twenty-five cents an hour. Twenty-five American cents an hour.

AG: Not much.

L: Not much. From there I had to pay rent, eat, you know it was tuft.

AG: In what way has your life been most changed by your decision to come to America?

L: I think my life has changed most in my way to see the world. There are big differences were I was thirty years ago or thirty-five years ago and were I am here now. I came from a family were I sleep on dirt floors with the dogs and cats to a sleep in a nice comfortable bed. Has changed greatly in the way I look at people today, I see individuals, all that have needs, not only material needs, but special needs and the change in my life that I can is having a family here. It is a blessing to be in a place that offer anything that I want to be if I make my mind and it is the reason that I came here and so far what I put in my mind, I have reached my goals. I got a degree in religion education, I got another degree just coming up, six courses short in international business. What I put my mind in my life I can

make being here a big change. It is a big influence in my life. If I was there, I do not know how far I do.

AG: Have you been happy here and would you make the same decision again?

L: Sure. I am happy because this is the place that, again I go back that if you make up your mind and you have the desire to be somebody, to get to some place, there are endless, there are tremendous resources. I don't care if you use Spanish, America, I don't care who it is, you can make the difference in your life if you make your mind and there are resources and people willing to help you. See, I don't like to here when people say well, you know I had to have a scholarship or I had to do this or I had to do that. I got a scholarship because I work hard. See you work hard in school, you get a scholarship, right. If you work hard in high school, you will get a scholarship. My sons had it. They worked hard and they got the scholarships, but you to do something to do it. Nothing come free, but if you put your mind, you can do it. I will stay here, I don't like the cold weather, I move south.

AG: So you would make the decision again?

L: I would make the decision again and one of the things I would encourage people who want to come to the United States is you live in the Unites States, you better abide by the rules. Be part of the people, not outsider and this is what hurt today in the United States. I am American, even though I was born in Columbia I am American citizen. I shall abide by the rules, I shall obey the laws, I should do the best I can to better the county with what I know, what I should do. Learning the language is one of the things that every person come to the states, I don't care if they from Latin America or other parts of the world, that should be a primary goal for them. They cry and say, well you know, I don't know the language, you have to help me this way. Hey, you should learn it, if not, stay home.