

Oral History Interview with
Imelda Martinez

(unedited)

Conducted November 27, 1997
by Kim Eckert

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Interview
Interview with Imelda Martinez-Cortez
November 27, 1996
Interviewer: Kim Eckert

KE: Your name?

IM: My name is Imelda Martinez Cortez.

KE: Where were you born?

IM: I was born in Elsa, Texas, in what's called the Valley. The south-eastern part of Texas by the border of Mexico.

KE: When did you come to Holland?

IM; 1964. April. We came up here as migrants. I was 7 years old. My family was comprised of me, my two older brothers, my younger sister, and my parents. They decided we needed to move in order to get a better job and so forth for my dad.

KE: So then did you stay here?

IM: We arrived in Hartford, Michigan. We came with a group of migrants. We had family over here and so that family encouraged us to just stay and find a job here. I guess my parents had kind of thought of that, too. My mother at the time was pregnant. She had three children, she had triplets, which was significant at that time because it was '64. They had to be placed in incubators because they were so small and so, of course, couldn't leave the hospital. The group of people basically left in the fall, September and so forth, and my sisters were born in September. So, that was another reason that they just stayed. They couldn't leave anyway because of the babies that were in the hospital. Then, we moved to Holland. My father found a job

in Holland and we stayed here for about nine years. I'm the only one who is still in Holland. One of my sisters had lived in Holland for quite a while, but then she moved out again.

KE: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen in Holland over the past 25-50 years?

IM: I think it's just the fast growth. The economic growth. I find that amazing, that in so short a time this town has gotten to be a city. I think, too, the number of people of different cultures that have come here. The Asian culture, also the Hispanics, that group has grown quite a bit.

KE: How would you describe Holland?

IM: I still see it as basically a small town mentality. I think that I would describe it, too, as relatively closed. People that I have known who have come into the community have felt that they, for some reason or another, were not welcomed. I think it's a pretty town, and I like it in that way, but I wish that it was just a little more welcoming and open to other people who are coming in.

KE: Would you say that's the biggest negative of Holland?

IM: Yes, that it is so closed a community. Since I've lived here for so many years, I've seen a gradual change towards more openness, but I get impatient with that because it doesn't happen in a faster way.

KE: Could you describe common day from when you first came here compared to a common day now in Holland?

IM: That's really hard for me to do because it was such a shock coming here to this

community, even to Michigan. I didn't speak English when I arrived. None of my family did. We entered into a school where, I think, we were the only Hispanic family in the school. I think there were maybe about 200 kids or so. Then, just the weather here. In Texas it was always warm and hot. Coming up here the environment was just so different. I remember the first day that I saw snow. I was just amazed. The first time that I really saw trees, especially pine trees. I remember seeing them and just being amazed by how big they were and the scent, the pine scent they have. So I remember that. I took it like a shock. A typical day now is very different from that time. I guess if I can compare anything at any level it would be the way, for example, Sunday we can do things. We don't have to be in church and be quiet. That was one thing I can remember my mother and father being very concerned about, going to the laundry mat on Sunday. They knew, or thought that, everyone was supposed to either be in church or be very "home bound." From my culture, that's the time to go out, to go spend time with family, and visiting and doing a lot of activity. You go to church, too, but it's much more social than the Dutch culture, I think.

KE: Are you involved in a church now?

IM: I'm in the process of deciding whether or not to return to the Catholic Church. I was born and raised in the Catholic Church, basically. Then, I left the Catholic Church and joined the Reformed Church, the Hispanic Church here in Holland, so I'm kind of just reassessing where I want to be. I do feel that I need to belong to the church community.

KE: Has there ever been any controversy in Holland? Political, racial, cultural, anything with the church....

IM: I don't recall of any open controversy in which I was involved in. It's more of the underlying kinds of things that occur in terms of interacting with a different culture. In that sense, there has always been controversy, like "our values are better than your values," that kind of thing, and the tension that exists with that. But I've not experienced something so openly controversial that's been discussed. Only recently this year, though, I've heard in the news and heard through friends and people who are involved in the community about statements that have been made about the Hispanic community here. Statements that, in our perspective and our view, were quite offensive relating to the race. In that sense I hear about it and am certainly supportive of our Hispanic community doing something about it.

KE: You've spent some time on Hope's campus?

IM: I'm a graduate of Hope College.

KE: How has Hope changed?

IM: Well, right now I teach part-time at Hope. I teach one class. Last fall I taught one class, too. That's the way that I've gotten back in touch with Hope College. Prior to that, I didn't have too much contact with the environment there or people there. I am a graduate of there. I spent four years, from '76 to '80. Sadly, I would have to say that it was not a good experience for me. It was very isolating and quite alienating. A number of people that I started out with who were Hispanic and were my friends, I think there were perhaps maybe ten or so, and by the time I finished, there was only

two of us. People had been dropping out. I remember us having discussions and experiences that were pretty racial in nature, and just prejudice and discrimination that went on, and just feeling so apart from the Hope community.

KE: Do you feel that has improved or just stayed the same now?

IM: I've talked with just very few students of color from Hope College. From what they tell me, I guess it hasn't really changed all that much. There is still a feeling of alienation; the feeling that they're not accepted for just who they are and the culture. That is not something that is reinforced within the different levels of Hope College, in terms of the programs and the administrators and so forth. What I've seen in my classes in the Social Work department, that's where I work, that there is a real attempt to integrate into the classes and the curriculum the value of various cultures and how people can work within different cultures, which I certainly appreciate. There's also a discussion about oppression and discrimination and what that means. I appreciate that, as far as that department is concerned.

KE: Do you feel that occurs only within that department?

IM: That I can't say because I'm not familiar with the other departments.

KE: What attracted you to Hope? Because you were living in Holland?

IM: Yes. Within my culture at that time, my families were traditional, girls were seen as individuals who needed to be protected. Also, girls didn't leave the home without being married. That's the only reason you leave the house, otherwise you stay in the family, it didn't matter how old you are. In my family, since I was the oldest girl of six, they basically were following the rules and the traditional way of doing things.

My parents told me that it was great that I would want to go to college, but the only college that was close enough was Hope, and that's the one where I would go, or not at all. Because they said a girl does not go off on her own, does not go live in dorms and so forth. It was just not done. It would not be a good reflection on the family or on them as parents. So, that was the choice that I had, which was basically no choice. I had to go to Hope.

KE: How do you see the community as it reacts to Hope College? How does Hope portray itself with having minorities at the school? Presently, do you think that Hope portrays itself as being a very racially diverse campus, and then you kind of get there and kids go, oh, it's not like that?

IM: I'm not sure. I don't know what Hope does to reach out to the community. Maybe that in itself is the answer, that I don't know and I probably would have heard from the students about what things they would have done.

KE: How do you feel the Dutch heritage plays in the community today?

IM: I think that it's certainly a very strong influence in this community. As far as I'm concerned, each person has their own cultural heritage and I applaud their pride in it and their wanting to share it with other people, such as Tulip Time. That's the biggest thing, the Tulip Time Festival. That's wonderful. The conflict comes in when that heritage is imposed on others and the message is that the Dutch heritage is better or needs to be highlighted more than any other culture. That if you come into this community, you accept the Dutch heritage, too. That's definitely a message that I have received ever since I have joined this community, and since I was a child. I

think that has a very strong influence in this community, and probably will continue to. My hope is that other cultures, like the Hispanic culture or any other culture that comes into the community, will also be given the equal opportunity to express themselves as a community, and to express their cultural values and their customs. And that it be appreciated in the same way that the Dutch culture is also appreciated.

KE: What else do you care to cover? Was there a job that you had here that you particularly didn't like?

IM: I worked at Heinz for a summer. I lost about ten pounds and I was underweight. It was bad, just horrible. It was just a summer job during high school, but I thought I was going to die. The smell of vinegar and pickles wherever I went. That was the worst job I ever had. I've worked at about two or three different agencies here in Holland since I started my social work career. Even before that, I've been a social worker all of my life. One of the reasons I believe that's so is because my family has always said that you educate yourself, but you always remember where you've come from and the need to help our people, and to remember that there are people in need. You need to turn around and make sure that you are helping. I've always gotten that message, and I also think just being older, the oldest girl, that meant caretaker of all and that was reinforced a lot. During the summer, in high school, too, I would work at a school, being a teacher assistant helping with kids. I've always been pulled toward working with Hispanics. Again, I think that there's a real need for mentors for Hispanics and I'm sure for other cultures, too, and that's my interest. At the jobs that I've had, I've been perceived as a role model because I've either been the only

Hispanic in the organization, or the only Hispanic doing whatever job I was doing. I guess I've recognized all along that that was part of my job, too. I don't think I've ever had a job that I really despised, because I think I always look for something that has something rewarding about it and if it's working with Hispanics, then that is rewarding to me. The frustration comes with the kinds of problems that arise with the clients that I work with. The fact that discrimination still exists and the oppressive kinds of things that people do to each other in the community. It's like the more things change the more they stay the same. As I get older and I work in different areas, I see that it just continues and continues. After a while it's hard to be hopeful, and yet that's what you have to do in order to continue. I think I have a strong faith in God that there's a purpose in all of this, and that ultimately, He sees what is going on and there will be some justice. If not along the way, eventually there will be some justice that will be done here.

KE: What role do you see females playing in Holland, and has it changed?

IM: Well, in the social work field, a lot of social workers are females. I guess I've seen that women, at least in that field, have excelled in the level of expertise they have within the social work field. I think that's great. I've also seen that most of the administrators are men. That causes concern for me. So that glass ceiling that is talked about is still there. I think that, even in this community, I've seen women generally assert themselves and have this goal of really developing themselves and becoming self-aware and increasing their skills and being able to develop their profession, whatever it is. For the most part I've found women, for me, to be role

models for me and I've learned from them. With the Hispanic women, though, I think that it's interesting that because there are so few women that were graduating and going off to school in my generation, we are now at the front. People and other women are looking at us, me and my cohorts, my peers, as the role models, and that's kind of strange for me, too. We're at the front of the line now, people are watching us, younger women are looking to us for those changes. I feel good about that because I think that I've achieved some goals that I wanted to achieve many years ago and I've attained those. With God's help, of course, but I guess now it's time again to just turn around and see where everybody else is and see if there is some need to help others. We have to move those people up, too.

I've worked with young people quite a bit, and I certainly have, in my position as supervisor, I've heard of cases of families and the issues and problems that they experience. My heart goes out to the children. Because of my own experience as a child entering a foreign world here, basically, and the trauma that it caused, I want to believe that communities, and schools, and churches, and other organizations in this town are receiving children in a positive way, in a way that's non-threatening and that encourages kids to just be themselves and to grow. My heart goes out to those kids in that way. So it's very painful for me to hear of people who are supposed to be responsible and have some level of self-awareness about cultures and sensitivity to that, it pains me when I hear of situations where children are in elementary school and hear their teachers basically telling them that, because they are Hispanic, they aren't ever going to amount to anything. Because they are Mexican, because they

don't speak English, or they speak English with an accent or whatever, they aren't going to amount to anything. That really pains me to hear that. That's where I think that the more things change, the more they stay the same. It's like when is this going to end?

KE: Do you feel like that happens a lot? Once is too much, but...

IM: It's continuous. I have not seen it myself, but of the people that I connect with in the community, people that I trust, even people in the school system, that say it continues to happen. It's like it's 1964 again! Every year is 1964! That is sad because these kids are going to grow up having to confront that continuously. I think that's why I advocate for an appreciation of the different cultures, and not to be so self-centered about one's own culture that you dismiss the others. That's a danger when people become so focused on their culture. I'm not just talking about the Dutch culture either. I think there just needs to be a mutual respect and appreciation for others. I don't plan on leaving Holland, yet. There is some hope. I want to say, too, that there are people who are caucasian who understand the need for the respect of different cultures, and I certainly appreciate that. We've had a lot of long discussions about what can be done and how each of us can change our behaviors or our attitudes to make it more open and more inviting in terms of discussing our own heritage. There is hope, and when little things happen, I say, "Okay, I'll keep trying then."

I had an experience just a few days ago where I went back to 1964 again in my mind. When we arrived here, we didn't speak English, we didn't know the resources, it was just very, very new to us. We had some neighbors who, for

whatever reason, helped us out. I was a child, so I didn't quite understand the dynamics and the motivation, but I imagine that they were from a church or whatever, and had heard of us. There were three women, they made it a point of going to our home and helping us out. They would bring us food sometimes or new clothing or just kind of be available and they became friends of the family. Again, there was a little bit of an agenda of their own of "we're going to help you assimilate." As I grew older, I talked to my siblings about it and they said, yes, it felt like we were assigned something, a job, and so it didn't matter that our culture was being questioned or our values, or the fact perhaps that we were losing our Spanish, because they were emphasizing the need to learn English so much, that it didn't matter that you can't speak Spanish after awhile. You've just got to learn English, that's the big thing. Overall, they helped us tremendously. After a few years, we lived there nine years or so, then we left the area. When my father died they came to the funeral, that was in '81. After that, we never saw them again. But they were always a big part of our lives during those first nine years. Two days ago, I got this phone call from this woman who said, "Did you used to live in the Castle Park area?" I said, yeah. I thought maybe it's somebody from that time that I knew or whatever. They said, "Do you remember Etha." That was her name. I said, yes, and I thought she that they were going to tell me that she died because in my eyes she looked very old the last time that I saw her. She said that she was still alive, but that a couple days ago she had been asking, "I wonder what had happened to the Martinez family?" I thought, how bizarre. This woman who called was a neighbor of hers,

who had been spending time with her and they had gotten to talking about the old days, and out of that came from that came the story of this family, and she said, "I wonder what had happened to the Martinez family and those kids and did they go to school?" So she had looked in the phone book and called all of the Martinez's in the phone book, there is quite a few, to see if she could find which one it was. I thought it was interesting. It was like flashbacks of when I was a kid. She asked questions, and I told her about our experiences and it was just really ironic. I also found that one of the three had died, and that was sad for me. When you think of someone who dies you think of the impact they had on my life. I just think it's kind of ironic that we're sitting here talking about my childhood, and I just talked to her. So, I'm planning on calling on her and just seeing how she's doing after so many years. They are Dutch and they were born in the Netherlands. They were an interesting group of women.

KE: Well, I guess you guys had a big impact on them, too.

IM: I guess! They remembered us. They were good people who helped us here. You can't forget those people. There was this other older lady, as a child I thought everyone was about 90 years old if they were over 50. She didn't talk much about herself, but we always counted on her to bring clothing for us because we didn't have hardly any money. She also, every once in awhile, would make some soup and bring this big kettle of soup to us. By that time there were eight of us in my family, and my parents. We always appreciated that. Her name was Sue. I don't remember her telling us her last name. Because our English was a little limited, when we heard

Sue, we knew that the word for soup was soup, so what we ended up doing was calling her Miss Soup. Every once in a while she would come with the soup and some clothing or books or whatever and had no expectations of us. She was just simply sharing who she was and something for us. I just truly appreciate that because I have the most fond memories of her, and I really never even knew her. None of us really new her. She was just a beautiful person, always a nice smile. She just didn't have any agenda, it was just written all over her, there was no agenda. Just here's a gift and enjoy it. It was wonderful. There were some neat people along the way that helped and made us feel that we were valued, and that was good.

KE: Well is that all? Thanks.

IM: All I can think of at this point. Thank you.