

Oral History Interview with
Diana Mireles

(unedited)

Conducted December 2, 1996
by Teresa Cupp

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interviewer: Teresa Cupp

TC: Let's start with your maiden name.

DM: My maiden name was Diana Rios.

TC: Were you born in Holland?

DM: I was born in Holland and raised in Zeeland.

TC: How many children do you have?

DM: Currently I have three, ages six, five, and three.

TC: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen in Holland?

DM: I was raised in Zeeland, so I lived in Zeeland until I was nineteen years old, but we always came into Holland because my parents worked in Holland. We had family and friends in Holland, so they seemed together for us. I've lived here in Holland for the past ten or eleven years, but really growing up, Holland has changed tremendously. Before you were used to seeing caucasians and maybe Mexicans, but now you see a lot more culture and industries.

TC: Do you think Holland does a good job of making a good environment for other minorities?

DM: From my experiences and from listening to friends or other people who went to Holland, they are semi. I wouldn't say they do a great job, providing experiences. There are small groups around here who try to have the Hispanic population be involved with festivals and things like that. It's coming along. Given so many

people here, I'm surprised that it isn't more comfortable than what it should be.

When you were growing up and all the stores were downtown, you always got the feeling that you were looked down on. You were followed. Nowadays you don't get it as much but you still get it some; you're always looked at. I'm not one who just thinks that's what they're doing, but you do start to get that kind of idea and I think it's at some places more than others. I don't think that it's as bad as it used to be. Going downtown now and probably even in the mall it wouldn't be so bad because there is just so much of a mixture there that they don't think anything of it.

TC: What are some of the qualities that seem to stand out concerning Holland, in your opinion? Is there anything that draws you here?

DM: The industries and the jobs; employment is a big thing. It's still not a big city and that's a quality that I've always liked. We always liked coming into Holland because it seemed like there was more to do. It's not so big, but there's enough for you to do. Kind of a small city feeling, but not too small and not too big. Being by the lake and the scenery. There is a nice combination of jobs and things to do. Those are the two things that keep me in the area.

TC: What grade do you teach here?

DM: Fifth grade Special Education. Education is another thing that has kept me around. I think here in western Michigan the school's goal is quality education.

TC: Do you think that Holland Schools do a good job of making a good environment for other cultures?

DM: I'm currently working at Holland Public Schools, but I didn't attend here. Of the

little I know, I think they are coming along. I don't think that the environment was there for not only the Hispanics, but for other cultures, too. I think they're doing a lot more for the Hispanic culture, but we have to keep in mind some of the others like the Asian cultures. We have more bilingual translators, but there isn't enough to go around for some of the other cultures and we have to keep that in mind. The ESL program is keeping strong and they're still funding it. At our school we try to do our best because we do definitely have quite a mixture of population. It still has a ways to go; it's a hard thing to do. It's in the back of everyone's mind, I think. "What more can we do?" Again, it's getting educated in that and learning about other cultures. I understand maybe two cultures because I grew up in one and I am a Mexican, but then I look at some of the others that come from Cambodia and I'm different. How can I do my best to meet their needs and to understand them and to know where they are coming from and having the language barrier on top of it? It's hard.

TC: Do you have a lot of mixture in your class?

DM: In the classes I work in, the majority are Caucasian and Hispanic, but we do have some that are from Asian descent. There is a mix. Some of these kids have just come Mexico, some have been here for a few years from Mexico or the Texas area, some of them have grown up here; even among that, you've got a mix. We've got a few who don't even speak the language and we're starting out from square one.

TC: Growing up did you feel that it was a big problem or not?

DM: I didn't. When I was growing up, it just happened that there were only three or four

Mexican families and that was it. I always saw myself as part of them, I never thought of myself as different to some extent. It was hard because back then; Holland and Zeeland were small compared to what Holland is now. There were some people where you would say hi to them on the street and they would just ignore you. It was hard to accept that, but I wouldn't let it bother me, but I know my father would mention things like that. To him it was more prevalent than me because we were just younger. He still thinks about it to this day. It's sad that there were some people who just wouldn't accept you. We were just trying to make a living like everyone else; we were trying to do what everybody else was. In schools, fortunately, before I started kindergarten I was able to speak English, so that helped me. It didn't help my brothers and sisters, two of my older siblings who were held back in Kindergarten because they didn't know the language. We never had the help growing up because we didn't have the translators at conferences so my parents never went to conferences because the translators weren't there to translate for them and they didn't understand. Now, at least you see a lot more, but still not all schools have come around and I guess it depends on how diverse your school is and who you're around, but there are still some schools where it is very hard when you speak a different language. The majority of the teachers are English speaking and that makes things very tough. We have one who speaks Laotian between two buildings and she can only be stretched so far. For the Hispanic population, we've got a few more, but usually everybody is stretched to the maximum to try to help everyone else, at least so that they will feel comfortable. Growing up you assimilated; you came

right into the culture and never thought anything of it.

CT: Do you find that it's a problem for the children?

DM: When I grew up, there were only like three or four families and I happened to be at one elementary school and it wasn't until we got into the Middle School that we saw each other, but other than that no. My kids are exposed to more cultures and they still will come home and, because we speak both languages at home, my daughter prefers to speak English. It's like they don't want to be any different. There is so much out there now that you wouldn't think that it would make a difference, but it still does and I don't know what has caused that in terms of making comments.

They'll ask questions and they'll make comments and it bothers me. I just happened to grow up that way, but now there is so much out there now that why would they still feel that way given that there is so much of a variety of cultures. It's not just two anymore, we have quite a few represented here in Holland, but they still question that. I don't want them to feel different, or that they should be ashamed of speaking Spanish. Growing up, I think that the kids never really thought anything of it.

Everyone spoke English and that was it, but they didn't realize that we spoke Spanish at home or that we ate tortillas and not bread. A lot of it we didn't say it because we didn't want to stand out or be different. It used to be that there was only one Mexican store and everyone went to Cantu's and now, especially in this living area in Washington Square, there's one every two or three blocks and everybody wants to be eating tortillas and all that. There are so many more people here now, and for my kids to feel that way, I really am still not sure what the dynamics are. That my

daughter would rather speak English knowing that she needs to speak Spanish because her grandparents speak Spanish, and it's her father's main language. It's really interesting. She is five, but this started when she was two and three. Whatever it was, TV, or whatever she was being exposed to and her environment, and I remember thinking how can this be and how amazing it was that at two and three she was already forming her, maybe this culture is superior to that or something. Now she's gone to pre-school and she's in kindergarten now, and she still continues. My son who is older has questioned some things, but not as much as my daughter does. Then, maybe, but now we are not the majority yet, but the population has grown quite a bit. TV and that stuff, it makes a difference. Even though you try to put them in an environment where everything is pretty general and equal, they still pick up on all that.

CT: Where did you attend college?

DM: Hope. I graduated from high school with college at the back of my mind for financial reasons. My parents just barely made it and they lived check to check. My brother put himself through school, but at that point I just thought at that point that I would go out into the work force. So, I ended up getting hired at Hope in a word processing position. For me, everything was meant to be because it put me in that environment, and little by little I started taking a class as I kept working, and I eventually worked myself through part-time in between getting married and taking care of three kids. At the end I had to quit and finish my student teaching and had to finish full-time, but I never would have thought of Hope College before then. Never.

Growing up the perceptions are that it's a Christian college, it's a white college, and so you never would have thought about it. I'm Catholic and you know here it's Christian Reformed. Growing up I never would have considered Hope, I probably would have gone to Grand Valley or somewhere else. For me it worked out well both as a student and a faculty member.

CT: Do you think that they do a good job of bringing other cultures to Hope?

DM: They try. It's not a new thing, we've all lived in the United States for so many years and I guess for this area not having an exposure to so many cultures, it's new. Like in the Holland community and Holland schools, we're in the beginning stages of how can we understand and provide everyone with what they need to make them feel comfortable and to expose everyone, not just the cultures, to make them comfortable, but for everyone.

CT: I wish there was more diversity; it's a better learning environment and I kind of wish they would do something about that.

DM: It is hard because, I know, just working in recruitment. Again, it all goes back to the financial packages and bigger universities aren't willing to offer. For me, I never would have considered Hope. Some of those perceptions are out there, which, in the long run, aren't true, but unless someone shows you or you take a visit or you really open your eyes to it, you just kind of go along with the general perceptions out there. My older brothers had those perceptions, and it's not that bad. Unless you really get to know what Hope is about, in the long run, it's not that bad. Unless you really learn what Hope is about, you never would have known it. I would have never

considered Hope, I would have just gone somewhere else. I think some of that would have been how comfortable I would have been there with the diversity. They're trying and it's in the beginning stages, but it's tough.

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

DM: I don't think it's as strong. I know growing up in this area, I just felt it was so much stronger and that the ties were stronger. I think now with so many more new people in Holland that aren't Dutch and aren't from that background and all the different things, I think it's growing... it's harder to keep that strong tie. Even though we still have Tulip Time and we still have all those other--and I think that will always be that link. But it's just not the same anymore. We've got the north side of town growing and shops coming in and out, and it just feels so awkward to see Dutch Village there in the middle of all of the shopping centers. Yet, it's nice to know that it's still there and it's a big attraction for people, but I don't think of it as strong anymore.

CT: How has the public reacted to Holland becoming more of an industrial city?

DM: I don't know how overall the public has reacted, I just feel that with my family, we've just grown with it. But at the same time you always comment about how it's not the same like it used to be. It's like, we enjoy the growth because there are more jobs and we are gaining more of a varied population and other things to do. At the same time, we're still saying, "We never used to lock our doors." With the growth we're getting more violence and crimes. You just don't trust everyone. Growing up, especially in Zeeland, and even a little bit in Holland here, you just knew a lot of people and you never had to feel like you had to lock your doors, you could trust that

your neighbors were looking out for you. Everybody just sort of knew each other. With the growth, at the same time, we've grown with it and we're enjoying some of it, we do have the feeling like things just aren't the same or that the small town feeling is going, and that's the scary part, to let that go. Overall, I think everyone is happy. It's nice that you don't have to drive to Grand Rapids to go to the mall. We used to go to Grand Rapids all of the time to go to the mall, at least we have one here; maybe not as big, but we're getting a lot of variety now so we'll have that stuff here closer to home. Before it used to take about five minutes to get out of town, now it takes about fifteen with all of the lights and things sometimes, but you just kind of take that and go with it and make the most of it. It's hard, some of the problems that come with it, like the gang situations we're having now. Like it or not, that's true, there are gangs here and a lot of people won't admit that. My brother is a police officer, so it's just something that I know is true out there. As your population grows it brings in those problems with it. At the same time you don't want to realize it, you don't want to accept it, yet it's out there and it's close to home. You have your own family members involved in stuff like that, it really hits hard. These teenagers are growing up with all that. For me, personally, I think the peer influence now--peer influence has always been one of those major things, I think it's just so much now, it's just amazing for kids now. That is first and foremost for them. For a lot of them family isn't close, so they don't have a family or whatever else so that peer influence is really hard. It's hard to accept and it's scary when you talk to some of these teenagers and their mind-frame. They don't think about anybody else but

themselves. They don't think of the future, they don't think about what's going to happen or the consequences of it. It's scary for me because growing up we used to come into Holland downtown and the Burger King and the Laundry Mat and you would cruise down that way and go down to Kollen Park and you came around and you kind of just... life seemed so simple then. You just hung out and just had fun. For the kids nowadays, things are so much more complicated. Not to say that there weren't drugs or alcohol back then, it was there, but the pressure wasn't. You're not just talking about pot or marijuana anymore, there are bigger and harder drugs or bigger crimes; there are guns now and back then we never would have. The growing of Holland is hard to accept, but it's there. I look at my nephew, and it's hard to imagine; life seemed so simple back then. I think now what my nephew will be saying ten or fifteen years from now, and I hope that he doesn't say life was so simple back then because to me it's just getting tougher. I think of my kids and I'm trying to raise them with the right, solid foundation hoping that in the future they'll do the best. We all come across challenges, but....

CT: Do you think of Holland being that place?

DM: Yeah. I keep thinking that I want to go back to Zeeland, but Zeeland's growing, too, and like it or not they have problems there also, maybe on a different scale. We try to protect our kids and always try to do the best thing, I know my parents did that and that is why they stayed in Zeeland and kept us and had us and then eventually came into Holland. Just hope for the best. You can't always protect your kids. There are good schools in Holland and there are a lot of good things going on just try

to treat them the right way.