

Oral History Interview with
Rosa Nino

(unedited)

Conducted October 31, 1997
by Geoffrey Reynolds

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds

GR: Would you please state your name and place of birth?

RN: My name is Rosa Nino, [date removed], 1958.

GR: Where were you born, Rosa?

RN: I was born in Alfa, Texas.

GR: What part of Texas is that?

RN: The Rio Grande Valley.

GR: Is that where your extended family is from?

RN: Yes.

GR: Do you have any children living with you in Holland?

RN: I have a 12 year old son.

GR: And his name?

RN: His name is Daniel Brian Jones.

GR: Describe your first impressions after coming to Holland.

RN: It was something totally different. I came to Holland when I was four years old, and I had never seen Anglos before in my life. It was a shock. Afterwards, as I started growing up, being the only Hispanic person in the school where I graduated from, it was very different.

GR: Where did you graduate from?

RN: I graduated from Hamilton High School.

GR: What are some activities or organizations you have been involved in?

RN: I have been on the board of Community Action House and right now, I'm involved with the board at Community Health Center. I have basically worked here at El Centro for the last seven years.

GR: Since you have come to Holland, what have been some of the most significant changes you have noticed?

RN: The only thing I have noticed is that there are a lot of Hispanic people here now, because when we first came you could count them on your hand. Now, there are so many people here that I don't even know half of the people who are here.

GR: Do you remember some of the first families?

RN: I remember the Sievas, Martinez, and Garzas were some of the families. Really, they were the only ones we knew of when we moved here.

GR: Where did you first live when you moved to Holland?

RN: When we moved to Holland when came as migrants, and we came here directly into Holland, and we stayed with a family that were friends of my parents. They knew them from Texas. We stayed with them for about two weeks, then my father got a job at Pilgrim's Farm in Hamilton, and we moved into their camp. After the season was over, my father decided that we were going to stay here. So we moved into Hamilton and we lived there until 1977. Then my father decided to come into town, so moved here into town.

GR: What part of town did you live in?

RN: We have lived on 17th Street - that's where we lived until '93/'94, right between

College and Columbia.

GR: Have you been involved in any of these changes that you've seen in Holland?

RN: In a way, I'm a background person. When there's changes going on, I try to help out by doing the work. I don't like to be out speaking in the public and to be noticed. I help in the background to get things going and then let it take off.

GR: Have some of the changes affected you directly?

RN: No, not really. Not at this time, but maybe in the future there will be changes that affect me, but at this time no.

GR: Holland has been recognized as one of ten all American cities. What qualities do you think Holland has to earn this honor?

RN: There's a lot of jobs here. People can come in and really find a job in any field that they are looking for. There's a lot of community involvement. There's a lot of togetherness, because people, even if they don't know you, sometimes come and help you or help you help somebody else.

GR: What things does the community still need to work on?

RN: Well, we are a melting pot, and we still need to get people to understand each other's cultures, since there is so many different people here now. We need to understand each other and respect each other's culture. That's something we all need to work on.

GR: What are some of the negative aspects of Holland that you have seen?

RN: I myself have not really seen any. I have always been a go-getter, so I don't let anybody or anything stop me from going forward. So I haven't faced anything yet.

GR: Describe the role the church has played in your life while in Holland.

RN: I'm a Catholic, and I've been involved with the Catholic Church here, Saint Francis.

It's helped me to learn how to appreciate what I've gotten, how I work with people, and it gives me a lot. I've been able to go there when I run out of patience with people and just pray to get my back my patience, because I have to deal with these people. It's really helped me a lot. I was a single mother for about six years.

Having a child that is mildly retarded, being single parent, you have to climb a lot of steps. If the church hadn't been there, I think I would have just taken a lot of baby steps, instead of the giant steps I have taken to get where I am now.

GR: How did you decide to join the church you are currently involved in?

RN: It happened through my parents. My parents were involved with it - mostly my mother and my sisters. And I just continued going to the same church.

GR: What role does the church play in Holland as a community?

RN: I think it plays a real big role. Doing the job that I'm doing now, when I need assistance or I'm looking for help for someone, I go to the churches. They helped out a lot. They have helped families, not only with rent money and food, but also clothing and sometimes shelter. But they've also helped them spiritually. It made them grow. It made them understand that they had to work for themselves to be able to get on. They don't just give them their rent money and just let them go. They try to get them involved in their church. I think that it has a lot to do in this community.

GR: What about Hope College?

RN: Well, that's an experience. I went to Hope through the Upward Bound program.

After I was done, I went to register at Hope because I wanted to continue there. I was told that I was not college material and that I should go somewhere else. Since then, I really have not been involved with Hope.

GR: As you see it, what role does Hope College play in the community and visa versa?

RN: I really haven't seen it play. It's got the CASA program which is a great program. It's got the Upward Bound program which is also a great program. But other than that, I haven't seen it try to get the minority community involved in any of their programs or any of their other functions that go on.

GR: What is your heritage?

RN: I am Hispanic; Mexican-American.

GR: What role do you see that heritage play in the Holland community?

RN: Lately, I think it has played a lot. It has played a big role. There are a lot of Hispanics, now, here. They have brought their values from Mexico. Now you see it in the community. You have the dancers. You have them involved in other programs. I have learned a lot myself. Being a Hispanic person raised here, I learn a lot from these people coming in, because they are bringing a lot of the culture that I didn't know. So they are bringing it in and they are teaching us, the first people that were here, a lot.

GR: So in a way, you have been more Americanized?

RN: Exactly. I didn't know. I started to speak and understand more Spanish about seven years ago. All I spoke was English because nobody around me spoke Spanish. My parents spoke Spanish, but I would answer them in English. To me, at that time, I

thought it was okay, because everybody around me speaks English, I don't need to speak Spanish. But now that I know the language, I should have learned it as a little girl, because I lost a lot between not knowing it and knowing it. A lot of people that I talk to to learn about my culture, I couldn't until now.

GR: Holland's diversity, as far as ethnicities, has been increasing over the past several years. What effect has this increasing diversification had on the community and yourself?

RN: For myself, I really don't think that it has had a lot. I have always been very neutral. In the community, to this point I really haven't seen a lot, in my point of view.

GR: How has the role of women changed in Holland over the past several years? Have you noticed?

RN: I have never really looked into that issue. I have never really seen any discrimination at all toward women.

GR: Have you seen any changes in, for instance, work, family, church, educational settings?

RN: No, not really.

GR: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland? Anything out of the ordinary?

RN: There is a lot of gang activity going on. Basically, that's about all I see.

GR: Do you think that has affected the community in some way?

RN: I think that it has affected the community in a lot of ways.

GR: Can you tell me anything particular?

RN: Before, you were able to leave your doors open, walk out in the middle of the night,

and go to the corner store without having to worry about anybody staying or doing anything to you. Now, I don't think a lot of people feel you can do that anymore. There is always kids on the corner and they don't know how to deal with them. Me, personally, it's a problem, but I don't let it bother me from doing things I used to do before. If I see the kids on the street, I just try to talk to them and say, "What are you guys doing?" and "What's up?" I go in and they learn to respect you. Otherwise, to a lot of people I've heard it's a big problem, because they're just hanging out, doing this and that.

GR: Tell me about a job you have had in Holland that you have really enjoyed, and if you have really not enjoyed any jobs.

RN: I worked at Seven-Eleven, and believe it or not, I really enjoyed working there. I might have known people by their first names, but by their faces, I practically knew the whole community. It was the only one here and a lot of people used to come in there. I really liked that job; I left it because I got offered this job. I've been here for the last seven years.

GR: Of the two, which one do you enjoy most?

RN: I think they are equal, because the point is that I like working with people. It doesn't matter who it is. I like working with people. There, I got a lot of one on one. People used to come in there and say, "We're looking for an apartment, we're looking for this, have you heard of anything?" It's kind of like doing case management, and I'm doing case management now. So, it's the same.

GR: Could you tell me a little bit about your current job and where that's at?

RN: Right now, I'm a case manager here at El Centro. I started out as a secretary here, moved to office manager, and then from there I went to bookkeeper, administrative assistant, until I got this present job. I work a lot with the Hispanic community, trying to get them doctor's appointments. If they don't have anyone in their office who speaks Spanish, I go and translate. I do a lot of translating for the court system. I do a lot of translating for doctors' offices, social security administration. My job is to try to get the resources to the people who need them. To me, that's very rewarding. If I'm able to help somebody get the service they need, that's my reward, right there, for my job. That what satisfies me. That person will be able to live a better life or move around a lot better because they got the service that they needed.

GR: Can you give me a little background about El Centro?

RN: El Centro was started in 1987 as a senior program out of the basement of St Francis. From there, it got transferred over to Catholic Social Services in Muskegon. Once that happened, they moved into an office on Michigan Avenue and counseling came into effect. So they had counselors coming in and also somebody working with the senior citizens. El Centro has always had a very small staff. At the present time, we have a staff director, case manager, and four social workers who work here part-time. We just do a lot of advocacy, especially for the seniors.

GR: Is there a perceivable generation gap in Holland that you have noticed?

RN: I have not noticed it at all because I don't have a problem with it. Like I said, I work with a lot of seniors. I try to get them involved with the local kids. Two years ago, and last year, we had a Christmas Fiesta for the seniors. What I did, I asked a

lot of the kids that stand out in the street if they wanted to volunteer and serve and do this and that. I was very surprised that they did it, and they did a very good job. They helped a lot. We are having the fiesta again this year, and hopefully, they will want to do that again.

GR: Where will that festival be held?

RN: It will be held at the Tulip Rod and Gun on 136th.

GR: How would you define your generation?

RN: (Laughter)

GR: Any characteristics about it?

RN: How would I define it? The people in my generation who I have been involved with are...the Hispanic community is very laid back. They don't really let things bother them. Myself, I am a very active go-getter person. Comparing me to the regular generation is totally different, because I can jump in anywhere. I can be like the kids. I can be like the seniors - I feel like I'm 80 years old. It's really hard, because I don't really associate a lot with the people in my generation. I'm either associating with kids, or I'm with seniors. The ones that I know are very laid back, very relaxed.

GR: You say that is a cultural thing; can you explain more about that?

RN: It's not that we don't let things bother us. It's that we take it more in stride with "It's okay. If there's a problem, let's see how we can take care of it," without having to go crazy running here and running there and doing this and that. "We have a problem; let's find a way to do it. Let's get the family involved. Let's see what

they have to say." It's all a family issue. You ask your sister, "You know I have this problem - will you give me advice?" It's not like you're going crazy over whatever the problem is, you just try to solve it very calmly as possible and go from there.

GR: Have the problems and concerns of the average Holland citizen changed since you've been a citizen?

RN: I think so. I really do think so. I think in the beginning...I look at this gang issue. When I was growing up, they were there, but they were not noticeable. There wasn't, of course, no drive-by shootings or anything like that, but the gangs were there. Nowadays, basically people worry about a lot of things. Especially, that is one of the biggest things they worry about right now.

GR: In Holland in general, or?

RN: In Holland in general.

GR: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life while in Holland?

RN: A turning point for me was about seven years ago. I had left Holland, for I would say about seven years, came back. I walked into a community that is close, but at the same time, people are very distant. The type of person that I am, I had to go in there and not really become like them, but try to at least say like "play the game." I came back to Holland as a single parent without anything. I did not want to go on public assistance. I started looking for a job. At first, nobody would hire me, at all. Either, because I had too much experience, or I didn't have enough experience. They didn't want to hire me. I said, "fine." I went blueberry picking. Left my son with a

sitter and went blueberry picking. I made money so we could live on. My turning point was when I went to Ron and Muriel Robinson at Seven Eleven and told them, "Look, you are going to tell me, probably, that I have too much experience to work here. I need a job. I need to work." They said, "That's no problem." I started working there, and they understood my situation. When I had to be at the hospital; they got somebody to cover my shift so I could be at the hospital with my son. So, that was my turning point, when I came here.

GR: Tell me about someone important who influenced or affected your life here.

RN: A lot of people have affected my life. (Laughter) But Francis Gomez is one of our therapists. At the time that she hired me, she was a therapist at El Centro. Then she became the executive director. She has helped me understand, and she has taught me basically everything I know when it comes to the field of social work. She has taught me how to deal with people, how to go out into the community and look for help for these people. At the same time teaching me to do that, she kind of taught me how to help myself. So I admire her a lot for doing that.

GR: Have your priorities changed over the course of your life while in Holland?

RN: No, not at all. My first priority is family, and it's still family.

GR: Has your commitment to faith gotten easier or harder?

RN: It has stayed the same. My faith has not gotten less; it's not more. It's the same.

GR: What about your commitment to the community?

RN: I try to get involved as much as I can. There's a lot of issues I help out a little bit.

The issues that I believe in that come up - I try to do as much as possible to help out

in the community. Basically, that's all I can do. If they ask me to get involved, I'll get involved. If I'm not able to, I just say, "Look, I'm not able to, but if I can help you with other things, just let me know." So, I try to do as much as I can.

GR: Do you have an perspectives on others in Holland - families or friends?

RN: No.

GR: How about Tulip Time?

RN: (Laughter) I think from the time that I have been here, I have been to the Tulip Parade maybe three times. I bought a new house, and I live right on Tulip Lane now, so I can see the parade from our front porch. But I've only been there like three times. I've lived here for, I would say, thirty-some years and I've only been...It's beautiful. They do a very good job. It's just that it's not something I'd care for. I'd rather watch it on TV, than go to the parade itself and sit there and watch it. But, they do a wonderful job.

GR: I guess I should ask you what your perspective is on the Dutch culture in Holland?

RN: I have never really looked at people as being Dutch. I take each individual as they come. To me, it really doesn't really matter if they are Dutch, German, Polish, or whatever. So, I've never really paid attention to that. What they do during the Tulip Time is really nice. This year, I went to the Tulip parade, and I was very happy to see other cultures being asked to participate. It was really, really good. It was really surprising what I saw, but I was happy with what I saw.

GR: What are your views on bilingualism in the school system and non-native speakers of English?

RN: The bilingual program, I think it's great. It doesn't matter what you speak, we all need help to get started. I believe that that's what the bilingual education program is doing is helping these children to get started to learn English and go from there. And, vice-versa, because now they teach a lot of Spanish in the school and they are teaching these kids how to get started in that language. I tell kids, whoever, to learn another language, because it will get you to a lot of places, because two languages you are more apt to get a job somewhere, because you know those languages. Basically, when I have worked, I have used my language as a translator. I think it's a great idea.

GR: Do you have any opinions on the city government itself?

RN: I have been following the paper lately, about who's running for mayor. It's okay. Sometimes, they are just a little...I don't want to say...They do a good job; let me put it that way.

GR: What do you think of the diversity that has occurred?

RN: I think that's great. It was long overdue.

GR: And that's the end of side one, tape one, of the interview with Rosa Nino.

RN: Thank you.

(End of interview)