

Oral History Interview with
Drew Torres

(unedited)

Conducted December 2, 1996
by Andy McCarty

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interview with Drew Torres
Interviewer: Andy McCarty
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AMC: Your full name?

DT: Drew Torres.

AMC: And your date of birth?

DT: Yikes. What do you need that for?

AMC: You don't have to answer it if you don't want to.

DT: Alright.

AMC: Where were you born?

DT: Historia, Oregon.

AMC: When did you come to Holland for the first time?

DT: December, 1982.

AMC: Where have you lived during your life besides Historia, Oregon?

DT: I've lived in Lawrence, Kansas, Indiana, Wisconsin, and New Mexico.

AMC: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen since you been here in Holland?

DT: The ethnic diversity and the sheer growth of the city.

AMC: Have you been involved in the changes Holland has seen, and how did you get involved in them?

DT: Yes. One obvious way of involvement is as a police officer having to deal with the conflict and stereotypes and prejudices that persons who have not had experiences of living with people of other races and dealing with them.

AMC: What do you think the causes of these changes have been?

DT: The cause of the changes has been the economic growth of Holland. Word gets out that Holland's the place to go. You want to work, go to Holland. If you're in Holland and you don't work, that means you don't want to work. I think that is the cause for the greatest changes I've seen in Holland. It's just the growth.

AMC: When you moved here what were the first impressions?

DT: Very clean, predominately white, a community that has tremendous pride in itself. A lot of tradition and a lot of heritage.

AMC: What was your interaction with the people of Holland?

DT: Well, I married a Hollander, that's probably the ultimate interaction. I've gotten to know many, many people who are Hollanders that have also moved here. That's been my interaction.

AMC: In the community, you guys have a lot of community policing, like Weed and Seed, is that right?

DT: Yes, well community policing goes hand and hand with Weed and Seed, however they are two different things.

AMC: Do you think that works, or what are some of the effects of community policing?

DT: Yes, I do. The effects of community policing are probably best measured in long term. Because of our presence in the neighborhoods and our presence and interaction with school children, of grade school age kids that we have will, in the long run, make for better police community relations, better communities and neighbors policing themselves.

AMC: So do you think getting the officer out of the patrol car and the usual patrolling is a good idea?

DT: Oh yes, no doubt about it. Although it has its place and you still need the patrolling presence in the business districts and hot spots. However, policing doesn't have to be exclusively reactive.

AMC: When you first got here, was it more patrolling in squad cars?

DT: Yes, definitely.

AMC: What do you think caused the change from patrolling to more community-oriented policing?

DT: I think it's a general overall movement nationwide to have police officers get out of the cars and into the neighborhoods. A lot of people claim that Flint, Michigan, pioneered the modern day version of community policing of the beat cop. They're going through their own growing pains right now with that. But I think here in Holland Police Department we have a community policing unit that is very accountable for our time and our efforts and with what we do on our own. To do our own little programs in the community. I think what started it all was a matter of typical routine responsive type policing wasn't getting the job done as far as doing something for the crime rate.

AMC: When you came to Holland, what were some drawbacks or negative things you ran into?

DT: I don't know if there were any. There was only one theater in town when I first moved here - the Park Theater. That was it. That was the only game in town.

The Knickerbocker had just shut down, I think. So that was kind of a bummer.

This was all before the mall and what you see now. So it was kind of isolated in the entertainment type thing, but that wasn't so bad.

AMC: Since you've been here, have there been any controversies from your point of view?

DT: How about specifically what kind of controversies.

AMC: Controversies in the community or in the police department.

DT: From my job perspective, I think the biggest controversy has been our recent explosion in the black population, the Asian population. Our Hispanic population has always been pretty consistent, although it's growing in percentage. But as far as controversy, the largest generator of that is people of different races not understanding each other. Especially being so new to the Holland area, it's hard for people to adapt.

AMC: So do you think that the minority population has grown since you've been here?

DT: Oh yes. Well, you're from Grand Rapids, but in Holland you could probably count the number of black families within the city limits on one hand. I mean literally. Since then the economic growth of Holland has demanded that we have more persons in the economically oppressed cities move to Holland and that's created this situation.

AMC: Since you've been here, how has Hope College changed and how has the community reacted to the changes of Hope or the students?

DT: I don't know if Hope College has changed so much. Although, a good friend of mine who attended college in the seventies at Hope, and who is a party animal

himself, he's no slouch. He told me one day that students then wouldn't dare think or dream of walking down the sidewalk with a beer in their hand. As I'm sure your aware of, that attitude has certainly changed toward the latter part of the eighties and early nineties. I don't know what that stems from. A tolerance, maybe, from the parents of the kids born in the seventies. They tolerate more from their children, which leads to present day college students becoming less respectful of the law itself as it's written, or for their neighbors. But I think that has turned, because now, I know, students are much more leery, and they're getting pretty good at hiding the beer bottles. But I think in that sense, Hope College has changed. I don't know if they're getting back to basics or not yet, hopefully.

AMC: What do you make of the increasing diversity in the Holland community?

DT: You're talking about ethnic as well as economic? It could only be good because there are very many service industries, such as food service and retail, that are hurting terribly because of the low unemployment rate in this county. By having persons come who are willing to work and start out at the lower end of the economic scale, that can only be good for Holland, to have this work force move to Holland. It has its drawbacks, like I've mentioned, of course, being able to assimilate. They bring their morals and beliefs and values of what is tolerable and what is not from what ever city they come from and think they can pose that on lifelong Holland residents, and they find that's not true. That creates friction, also. But as they live here they learn what Holland's values are and what we stand for and try to abide.

AMC: How do you feel the Dutch heritage plays in the community today? And how does it interact with other cultures present in the community today?

DT: I think the Dutch culture, which are simply those living today who are of Dutch ancestry, I guess, have really embraced the new comers. People from all races, regardless of race and gender, participate in the Tulip Time Parade. I think Tulip Time is more a celebration of your own culture, whether it be Hispanic, Asian, black, or Dutch. However, you have to admit Holland wasn't built in a day, it took a lot of work and a lot of hard working persons. I think the Dutch will always have an impact and influence in Holland, will also have a role in determining where Holland goes in the future too.

AMC: Have the problems facing the general citizen of Holland changed since you been here?

DT: Yes. The gang problem is the most visible probably. In 1990-89 we had some Hispanic kids belong in certain groups along with some whites. But it wasn't until 1990-91 that we had the outright formation of gangs rivaling other gangs, sometimes racially divided. Other times just simply because of who you were associated with. Those crimes associated with gang activity have impacted greatly on Holland residents with the shootings, the stabbings, just the fights, the distractions in our schools, it's been a whole new field of challenge for our schools and teachers to have to deal with kids who are going to the gang life.

AMC: In your opinion how do think these gangs started in Holland? Were they from Chicago, Grand Rapids?

DT: There was maybe one or two so called groups or gangs that didn't really behave the way we stereotype gangs to be now a days. But I feel, my personal opinion, is that a group of Asian kids from Northern California came to town professing their allegiance to the Crypt, calling themselves Crypts with an Attitude, CWA, was probably the starting point for Holland city youths organizing themselves into the Latin Kings to counter that, and that's when it all started.

AMC: Did you have anything to stop the gangs or help the kids?

DT: Well, what community policing does now, is we get ourselves involved with programs like the boys and girls Club, Youth for Christ, to a degree, Child Planning Services (what runs your Higher Horizons at Hope College, Big Brother-Little Brother type program) and any other efforts that we can to portray ourselves as a positive, male role model. A lot of these kids that get into gangs, economically there's no real definition, but, without a doubt, a kid will join a gang because there's something is missing terribly in the house. Whether it's an abusive father there or no father present at all, something's going wrong that a kids got to look elsewhere for. So we feel that by giving kids who are at risk in that situation something positive to look up to or look forward to, we can help stand this gang thing.

AMC: So your saying these gangs are all economically based?

DT: There was a young white kid who was with the Latin Kings for a while before he went to jail, whose father was constantly on the go. He'd pay people \$200 to watch his kid for the weekend, because he had to be out with work related or whatever.

The kid had nothing at home to bond him or set him straight, so to speak. Then you have the dirt poor kid, again with no father in the home, who will join, too.

AMC: We already talked a little bit about the industry in Holland, but where would you speculate Holland would be without a lot of the industry Holland has?

DT: Well, you could look at Benton Harbor as an example of where we might be without our economic diversity. Our industry base here in Holland is what keeps the whole area...you've got auto, you've got furniture, you've got Tool and Die, and so many other things...agriculture. But our town would just wither up like Benton Harbor.

AMC: Have you ever noticed a big generation gap between ages in Holland? Has that ever caused friction?

DT: Well, it always will, just ask any parent of a teenager. No more than any other community.

AMC: In the department here in Holland, how has the role of women changed in police?

DT: Well, briefly, in 1989 there were no female officers aboard. We now have eight female officers. One is a Spanish speaking minority. The others are white females. They play a very, very important role. Women can deal with situations differently than men, as we're all well aware of. They can sometimes talk a person out of doing something that maybe a male officer would have had a tougher time doing. I think we probably arrest almost equally the number of women as we do men. So it stands to reason that the force should be as diverse.

AMC: Could you tell me what you have heard others say of Holland, such as family from

out of town or friends?

DT: About the city itself? Very, very impressed. Impressed with the culture and the heritage we show here, including our new arrivals. They're impressed with the cleanliness of the city, that's what first struck me when I moved here from a small town in Kansas, was how clean everything is, which shows pride in your community, something that you claim as your own. The hospitality, the friendliness, generally your above average thirty thousandish city.

AMC: And that's it. Thanks a lot, I appreciate it.

DT: Good deal. You're welcome.