

## **Interview with Josie Gonzalez**

Home of Josie Gonzalez, Moorhead, MN

May 1, 2003

### **Interviews**

Cindy Mason (primary interviewer)

Duane Huseby

Kayla Muehler

*Tape: Side A*

Cindy: Today is May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003 and we are speaking with Josie Gonzalez. Can you give us your full name and spell 'Gonzalez' for us?

Josie: Yes. My name is Josie Gonzalez. And it's G-O-N-Z-A-L-E-Z.

C: Okay... Where were you born and if you don't mind, it's up to you, if you feel like sharing... Can we get your birth date?

J: I was born January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1955 and I was born in Florence, Arizona. My father was undocumented um... in 1955. And at that time, you used to be able to... you would be able to get a bounty... there were bounties put on persons who were undocumented and someone... called the INS on my father. There was a chase in the Arizona forest, and my mother was nine months pregnant. So the INS caught my father, my mother went into labor, and I was born in a prison hospital.

C: So, do you have brothers and sisters then?

J: I have eight brothers and sisters.

C: So, then, did you grow up primarily in Arizona, or how did you get to...

J: No, my father spent six months in jail and then he was taken to Mexico. My mother went back to her hometown in Texas. And, so, that's primarily where I grew up.

C: Then, is your mother also originally from Mexico?

J: No. My father is from Mexico. My mother is a United States Citizen. And she's also from Texas. I'm a first-generation um... Mexican-American, you know, from my father's side. So I'm the first generation of American citizens on my father's side.

C: Is your mother also of the heritage or ethnicity then...

J: She's of Mexican decent.

C: We understand that you grew up, then, in a migrant family... Where did you travel and what was your life like in that situation?

J: I... As long as I can remember, as far back as I can remember, I've always been in the migrant stream. But I remember us being in the migrant stream in Texas. We would go to different parts of Texas, pick cotton um...and hoe different things in the field. I, personally, didn't do it, but I migrated with my parents. And I remember moving from school to school, even within Texas... I went to a segregated school... I remember, I attended a school in Munday (M-U-N-D-A-Y), Texas. And I remember sitting in the back with... some other Mexican-American children. And the white students would sit in the front. And then we would ride the bus to pick up the black students and they would sit in the back of the bus and we sat in the middle of the bus. So, that was pretty consistent throughout Texas where I would go to school. I wouldn't see any black children. I grew up connecting more with the black community, and so I would go from my neighborhood into the black community. And they taught me how to dance and different things, you know, they were my friends. They were my childhood friends... I remember... sleeping on the floors and being able to see the... the ground from where I was sleeping on the floor... my father – I remember eating rabbit – I remember... our house was always full... my mother's sisters were always there. My mother's oldest sister had... seventeen children and her second sister had fifteen. My mother had the least and she had nine. I remember them always together. So our house was always full. The cousins were always around. While all the parents worked together in the fields.

C: So you traveled then with your relatives?

J: Yes. We would all travel together to different places. It wasn't unheard of for twenty-five of us to be in a one-bedroom house. Everybody. I don't know how we did it. When I was in third grade, when I was nine years old, we traveled to Minnesota in the back of a big Tandem truck. Somebody did us a favor and brought us and said that we could work in the fields here. And, so we all... they gave us a ride in the back of a Tandem truck and... we were migrants ever since to Fisher, Minnesota, which is... north of here, about um... 85 miles.

C: So, then, as you grew older, did you start to do any of the work or did you just stick with school?

J: I remember when I was nine, the first year that I came, and it was before... still... the civil rights still hadn't been passed and I also remember that the church, the Catholic church, was running... the daycare, or facilities, for the migrant children. So, I would be picked up on a Sunday and then I would be returned back to my home on a Friday evening. And this was at Mount Saint Benedict in Crookston, so they'd... drive us over there and we'd be there... That was really hard for me. I was the only girl and I didn't get to see my parents. And they did that until – then it was Johnson administration – all the acts passed and they developed migrant schools. By the time that happened, my father taught me how to work the sugar beet fields when I was 11.

C: Then, you went on to college or...

J: Actually, when I... was in sixth grade, I was working in the fields... There was an incident at our farm... We didn't have bank accounts or anything like that and we were just um... completing the beet harvest. My mother had hid all of the money that we had just gotten paid in, under, a mattress and we had gone to Crookston. My brother had bought a motorcycle. And our house burned down with all the money in it. And, so, we could not return to Texas that year. That was the first year that we resettled here. And, because of our financial situation, both of my parents went to work and I had to stay with my brothers and sisters. So, after sixth grade, I wasn't allowed to go back to school because I had to help to take care of my siblings, my younger siblings.

C: What prompted you to stay in Moorhead though as opposed to Fischer or any other area?

J: I stayed out of school because I continued to work in the fields in the summer and take care of my siblings in the winter. And I was married when I was 16. And um... my husband and I will be married 32 years, better get that right – 1971. Anyway, 32 years this October, we'll be married. And my husband had worked at a newspaper. My husband works for the Forum. And he had worked for the Crookston Daily Times... He needed to just make more money to take care of his family. It was a good economic opportunity. And so we moved to Moorhead. But as far as my education... as soon as I got married, I went back to school. I had to get a special consent from the governor because I was under 18... to be able to finish school. And so I ended up going to high school with the students, but because I had a baby, I... was able to just go at, go on, go ahead and get my... schooling done from home. I would go... at night. I would go to classes and teachers would spend extra time with me. And so I was able to make up for my lost time in school. The following year I registered at the University of Minnesota. I took nursing classes and... as I was going through clinical, where you do hands-on with patients, I had one patient that died and that was really hard for me. Then I had another patient that died and that was traumatic for me. I was caught in the corner and they were doing all these things to try and revive the patient and that was just traumatic, something that I didn't think I wanted to do. I spoke to the Sister who was leading the nursing school and she wanted me to get a feel – maybe I wanted to just work at the hospital, to get a feel of what it was like to work with patients because I didn't want to, this is not what I want to do. And...and... she wanted me to stay in school so I worked at the hospital. And I just, no, I know this is not what I want to do. I want to work with people, but not in this environment I can't. I... I didn't used to be weasy. I grew up on a farm, where you killed chickens and you did all this stuff, but after that incident in the hospital, my stomach, just, it's just so weasy that anything, that anything, if I, just a scrape and I see blood, you'd think I was going to faint. But my stomach is – it must have been a really traumatic experience because it impacted me and afterward, anything like that impacts me now.

C: And, so... you said the University of Minnesota nursing school, that was in Crookston then?

J: That was in Crookston. At the University of Minnesota. After that, I decided I wanted to be home... In the summers I would volunteer...with migrant health at the local clinics. And I would also... work at migrant schools in the summer. And so I did that for awhile. And when we moved up here, I started my own daycare here – a licensed daycare here. I was pretty content being just a housewife. You know, I loved just being with just the kids and family. And the children I was taking care of... were children that were a friend of mine from Crookston and so needless to say, they knew me, and so that was really good.

C: All right, so you settled in Moorhead then, did I read right, it was 1980 is that when...

J: Yeah, 1981.

C: 1981, okay.

J: Actually we came in, yeah, in like March of 1981. My little girl was small.

C: Um... Have you found it difficult to maintain your culture in this area dominated by Scandinavians?

J: No. I – that was the question. I think that from a very small age, given that I went to segregated schools, I had been conditioned to be bicultural. In order to survive, you have to... be able to, to do what you need to do to survive in a dominant, white dominant, culture. And at the same time, be able to keep your identity. And so I, completely, keep my culture here. You can see it in my home. And this is where I am a complete Mexicana, as opposed to being out there.

C: So then, do you maintain friendships, primarily with people of your um... culture, if you are, you know, used to being bicultural then you have friends...

J: Both.

C: Both, okay.

J: Both cultures.

C: Okay. What are some of the ways then, that um... you would um... celebrate your culture, different sorts of... perhaps during holidays or during um... special times of year...

J: We try to maintain our culture, especially with music, all of our... my house is always filled with music. We had to turn it off because you were coming. But... we always have... Latino music playing. We've maintained all of our ethnic foods. I still make ah... tortillas from scratch. Um... we still cook our beans for three hours... we do all of our ethnic foods. We maintain our colors. And also our rituals. I have an altar. Um...

We celebrate those holidays, you know, the traditionals, the... especially the Virgen de Guadalupe in December [Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico]. And um... the way that we celebrate Mother's Day, things like that. It's on the ninth, instead of that Sunday. And then... we sing a different type of serenade, you know, I put it on the cassette. But we turn in, on, it's a mañanita that you sing to, to people... we also have a dish satellite, to where we're able to see constantly, all I watch is pretty much television in Spanish. And I watch the news and CNN, like that, but predominately we watch um... Latino television.

C: What prompted you to become an advocate for the community here, the Hispanic community in Moorhead?

J: I worked at... Clay County Social Services for eight-and-a-half years. And I felt that the Latinos did not have... an advocate in some of the things that I knew I could do well. And I was specifically thinking about when I used to work at Social Services... I worked there for eight-and-a-half years and I felt that, that the migrant community, and they are my love. That's, the Latino community is my love. And I felt that at times, um... the system discriminated against them. I knew my coworkers; I knew how I felt when my coworkers, and how I was treated, and I felt bad for how the migrant families were treated. I felt that I had worked in that system for eight-and-a-half years, and I needed to give to them opposite the system. And so that's what I did.

C: Can, can you think of anything, any particular instances that you, you heard of that they might have um... conflicts they might have come across?

J: There are many. I could write a book. When I left Clay County Social Services, I decided that I wanted to do advocacy for the migrants, specifically to the migrant community. And what I thought that I would do, was, and I told my husband, if he would let me just advocate during the summer, I want to put up my little place and I wanna help at least 30 Latino families, migrant families. Just help them access medical assistance, maybe do an appeal here or there for services, and... and also just translate for them. And I was specifically just talking about social services and accessing financial assistance. And so I took my retirement funds and I invested them in just a little shack, it's already been torn down... It's not even on the map anymore. But, I used to have, a waiting chair was the backseat of a pick-up, you know, somebody had thrown it and they donated it to me. That's where clients sat. And it was just a little 10 by 12 room and... Somebody donated the use of a copy machine for a month. They paid it... It was an Indian woman. And the... adult ed gave me case files that they didn't use anymore. And, so I set up shop. So, then I set it up the way I used to run the migrant center for Clay County Social Services. So I set it up on that basis. And I told my husband, my hours are going to be nine-to-five, and I'm only going to work Monday through Thursday, no Fridays since I'm donating my time. And 30 families was my goal. And I ended up with over 230 families.

We went to the commissioners and people went with me. And we talked about how people weren't accessing services... they were being denied... inappropriately and um... people would apply for emergency assistance and they were being denied. People

would apply for financial assistance and would be told they wouldn't qualify so they would withdraw their applications. Things are better. In my... understanding of what the system was supposed to be and what I knew about the rights, was, was that it was inappropriate for them do. For instance, if somebody comes in and, you're told you're not eligible for this program, and they're just verbally told that, and then they don't have an opportunity to appeal the decision, which is their given right to appeal. And so, we did stuff to educate... our clients. We went to the commissioners and said we got these many cases. We had a meeting with the commissioners, the commissioners and the director and there was some stuff in the media and... I said that they were making decisions by shooting from the hip and the director didn't like that. Anyway, in January, they made a decision that Clay County had mismanaged the Food Stamp program. And they had to get food stamps to, I think, it was like three or four families. By then, migrant legal services got involved... with the cases and... when I was asked, you know, how do you feel about the decisions in January. I was like, "it was real hard to eat retroactively..." So that's the kind-of cases, you know, a lot of it was emergency assistance, funding for motels, shelters... the food stamps, and just, you know, things that I thought were inappropriate. You know, from my knowledge of how the programs were supposed to be run.

C: You kind-of covered how you started your group... Can you tell us about your work with Minnesota Churches Antiracism Initiative?... and how that came about? And what kind of response you've had? Can you do that?

J: In 1992, I left Social Services in February of 1992, the summer, the summer of... 1992 is when I, I did the advocacy group, in fact it was called Project Advocacy, for my families... the families really struggled and it was such a big group and I really took it to heart... I went through a period where I felt that I was, I didn't want to... I didn't feel good about, about working with white people at that point or having relationships with them. A pastor came to me, his name is... Pastor Bill Beyer, came to me and said... we'd like to talk to you, we got this, your phone number was given to us by Carlos Mariani. Carlos Mariani is a state representative for the west side, which is predominately Latino in... Saint Paul. And Carlos was a friend of mine and he used to work for the Minnesota... Council of Churches. And he gave this pastor my number. He called and I go, "Where'd you get my number? If you don't tell me where you got my number, I'm not going to talk to you." See, you've got to understand that for the past nine years I felt really oppressed in the form as I would be on committees representing the county. I would be... on the committees representing Latinos. And my voice was never heard. And other Latino's voices were never heard. So I was pretty angry at this point and bitter about how our Latino community was being treated still.

And just thinking that, you know, putting appeals, you know, in front of judges and... still... the process wasn't fast enough to put food on the table, you know, for the Latinos that were suffering. When I did an appeal, in Ada, that summer, the commissioners were upset because we, we'd gathered all the migrant families together. And one of the comments the commissioners made was, "You know, my Mexicans don't complain at my place." You know, we were an object. You know... He wondered what the problem was because his Mexicans didn't complain. And so, why were we making a

big deal out of, out of that. Um... And that was in Ada. In Clay County, they were a lot more receptive. But I, I was pretty upset about some of the outcomes and we still didn't have an outcome, a decision on the food stamp cases with the migrants that, that had gone on before.

And so based on all that frustration, I didn't wanna be on anymore, you know, committees that, where, I wasn't going to be validated. And I knew that I was angry. But I didn't know why. And so this pastor, I said... "Out of courtesy," I go, "you know, to my brother Carlos, I will meet with you." And we met. And... over lunch and he said "I want to deal with racism. The Lutheran church has seen this as an issue um... nationwide and we want to deal with it." And I said... "Who have you talked to?" And he mentioned some individuals in the community that had been on those committees as white leaders, you know, telling us, you know, how we were going to fix our Latino community. And I said, "I don't want to talk to you anymore. You work with them, that's fine. You don't work with me. If you want to work with me, you don't work with them. You want to know about racism, I can tell you my perspective because of what I have lived and gone through with the Latino community. And... how our community has suffered... in this community." And... he impressed me, he crumbled a piece of paper with the other names and threw it away right there. And that impressed me and... he said, "I want to work with you."

So we went to a workshop with 40... 40 Lutheran pastors. We went out somewhere, I think it was at White Earth. We went and Jim Addington spoke there and his wife, Nadine. And it was... a group of pastors. I remember walking in and thinking, "Where am I going to sit?" You know, everybody was white and I felt really uncomfortable. And I remember sitting by... I didn't want to sit by this pastor because he was all dressed up and, and he had a Concordia ring and that immediately turned me off. And then the pastor on this side, he wasn't dressed as neatly or as, you know, his suit wasn't brand new. He didn't look like, you know, he looked like he came from a farm. And so I go... I can relate to him. I'll sit by him. When I went to sit by him, he pulled away from me. And the pastor on this side [with the Concordia ring], pulled his Bible to share it with me. That pastor ended up becoming the Bishop of the ELCA. And... had an open-door policy with me after I became a Lutheran. And I will always treasure him, just from that very day. And... the fact that he was willing, you know, to extend [himself]. It was just, for me, you know, how I can misjudge people too, on the outside.

And... the Minnesota Churches Antiracism Initiative came about after the Rodney King incident. And so I was invited and I told Bill, this is the last thing I am going to do to address the issue of racism. I will never talk about... my issues with racism as far as giving testimony to give absolution to white people. I will not do that... This is the last thing that I will do to try and address racism. And I really didn't know what racism was, as far as the definition. But I knew what it felt like intuitively.

We went to Little Falls to a three-day workshop. And at that three-day workshop... what they did, I don't know if you're familiar with how it works, but what they did, they had various exercises and what they did was they took us... They took the people of color into a room and they had all of the other, the white people were in another room. When the day started, there were a lot of black men and you could tell they were angry. Some didn't even want to say their name. They were there and they were even angrier than I was. And I was the only Latina. There were five or six other blacks with

me and that consisted of the people of color... There was 40 in the group. And so we were definitely the minority as far as the numbers were concerned. And we had... a black facilitator, her name was Barbara Majors. She is a trainer with the People's Institute out of New Orleans. And Joe Barndt who is the director, the executive director, of Crossroads Ministry, was the [white] trainer, the other trainer. And he stayed with the white people. We were both asked a common question which "How do you feel? When was the first time that you knew you were different?" And... we could hear the white people laughing in the other room. And, one of the experiences of, of um... one of the black guys that was there was that his sister had been raped by... a group of white young men. Another one had been beaten... Another girl, just some different physical things that had happened to her. And a lot things that happened to us happened to us [as children]. The first thing, time, we knew we were different was when we were children, you know, and it was elementary age. And that's when it had happened to me. But I had never revisited that. That was the first time... I couldn't stop crying. None of us could. And as we heard white people in the next room, we could hear them laughing and sharing, we, we couldn't go back in there with the way that we were. And so... the facilitator took us to a movie.

We came back together the next day, we were able to be part of the group. But it was such a healing experience... for us. There was another, another part of the event where they asked people of color to sit in groups. And I was with my friend, the pastor, and I was with the... a doctor who was the chief of staff from Edina Hospital and I was with a professor who teaches, used to teach, humanities at... Moorhead State, also. And he was a graduate of Princeton. And so, I was just supposed to listen to them. And then they were asked a question and then we were supposed to respond... They were supposed to name their privileges... I sat there and I listened to these white men talk about, "I can live any where I want. I can go to any school that I want... I don't even have to go to the bank to get a loan. All I have to do is, is just pick up the phone and they'll send me the check in the mail. And I can get a job wherever I want, all over the country. I know I'm protected by the police and I know that my children will be safe when they go to school." And I couldn't stop crying. [pauses, upset]

After that, the doctor came and sat by me and he said... They asked us, "How do you feel" and that's when I started crying. I said, "You said it like you enjoy it. But it was the arrogance that you said it in that hurt me. Because I don't have access like you." And the doctor came... and...he said...I looked at him and he was crying. And that was the first time that I had seen anybody with status just crying. He came to me and he was crying. He said, "I need to ask you for forgiveness, as a human being, for hurting you." And he goes, "I need you to forgive me." And I said, "You're asking me to forgive you. Ah..." You know, and I said, "No. You don't need to ask me that." I said, "This is all new to me." And I wasn't the only person crying. The whole room, there were, everybody in different groups, everybody was crying. Anyway, I found out more about him. He shared himself with me. But he and I had... He's an only child... and he and I have become really close to this day... He says I'm his sister. And so, we just made some relationships...[and] from that came the beginning of my healing journey. In reference to racism. It had a name. It was the first time I had been validated as a person of color. I understood my rage, I understood where it came from and it was validated. I had white people [say], "Yeah, this is what we do to you and we know that we do it." I



wasn't crazy and neither was any of the other persons in the room. And, and that changed my life. And has changed my life. And I believe in that analysis. You know, I believe that we are all victims of racism. I don't think it's just me. I don't think it's just, just people of color. I think white people are victims also... But, it's, it's changed my life. That's, that's what MCARI has done for me.

C: Do you... talk to groups at the college or whatever about that, or about the program and...

J: When we started, it was Minnesota Churches Antiracism Initiative. And when we started, it was started in churches. And so we must have... Bill and I, I was the only one from Moorhead, and I was the only Latina from this community and Dr. Ken Covey, who's... a retired physician. He and I were the only individuals from Moorhead. And at first, the concept was that you could get a team and be developing teams all over the state to deal with issues of racism in the churches. And um... I remember that Bill lives in Fertile and that professor that used to teach humanities at MSUM lives in Detroit Lakes. We developed a team. I was the youngest one there and... there was a retired school teacher from Detroit Lakes and another person from Detroit Lakes... Professor Tom Faix and Dee Bowman, and Bill Beyers, the pastor, and myself and... Dr. Covey. And so we went all over the Red River Valley and talked to anybody who would listen and talked about the analysis. We went through trainings, and we grew, we shared... we became brothers and sisters... it was such a rewarding experience because we were teaching something different. Teaching not hate and having... Having people of color being validated and having white people be talked to about racism by people of, people of their own race talking about racism and educating them in what that was. And... it wasn't about guilt or attack. It was about educating. We came to see that the tools that worked in the sixties during, during the movements were protest and picketing and... boycotting that didn't work anymore. We needed to do education now.

C: What are some of the other groups then that you have been involved in? Are there any that...

J: Oh – you were wondering about the university. Anyway, that, I'm sorry, that... evolved into taking a look at...[institutions]. We started to see that, that initially MCARI was addressing individual racism and what we complained about as people of color were not individual incidents that impacted us. It was systemic incidents. I don't care if you don't like me. I don't care if you're individually a racist. What I care about is what, when you work and represent a system because that's, that's how you can hurt me. And so we started to see that it was systemic. And so they started doing the analysis systemically and um... we started learning more about that and seeing how white people have been caught systemically also. As far as being conditioned. And started looking at white privilege. We started looking at... internalized oppression and people of color and... and also how white people deal... with white privilege or not. How white people never have to think about being white. And we think about our color day in and day out. We then... started addressing that and we started to bring in the People's Institute. They started doing some things in this community. However, they don't do the dismantling

part and MCARI does dismantling of racism. So they provide tools, how you organize. And you become trainers within your system. And you go through a series of trainings so you dismant... the racism by dismantling whatever the mission statements you take a look at it and, and you, what is racist in that system. And you take a look at dismantling the racism. So, we become anti-racist.

C: Are there a lot of people that have taken advantage of this, in this area, of your, does the training and the....

J: Yes. Yeah. Trinity Lutheran has had... trainings and through the people that have gone through it with us and the church, we make connections with different entities and it's... gotten as far as lobbying universities ... the police department taking a look at that model and Clay County Social Service taking a look at that model... The community's aware of, of that model now... I think that, that we talk a lot about it and we've done a lot of training sessions. I'm sure that the Crossroads Ministry has been in Moorhead, you know, about a dozen times. I've [gone to the] big workshops, three-and-a-half day workshops.

*Tape: Side B*

C: Other groups that you've been involved with?

J: I became a Lutheran and because I became a Lutheran ... I became a trainer for the ELCA WELCA, the Women of the ELCA. And so I was also a anti-racist trainer for them using the Crossroad's model. That is their... official model. And so I also belong to that ... I've been on several committees. The Multicultural Committee for the ELCA also taking a look at issues within the Lutheran church. So... Do you want to talk about the committees that I am on now or...?

C: Sure, yeah, and if you have any... title or have held any offices and...

J: I am currently... I currently sit on the Board of the Ombudsperson for Latino Children... That's... a committee that oversees the ombudsman that investigates child protection practices in counties. And so, we have a person who's legislated if a child has been removed out of the home. Then what... our staff person does, she goes and investigates the circumstances and makes sure that... the law has been followed so I sit on that board. I have sat on the Department of Corrections um... Battered Women's Program... It's just approving grants for battered women and my specific role there was just to make sure that Latinas were given a piece of the pie to run the Battered Women's programs.

C: Was that in Fargo-Moorhead or...?

J: No. That was in the cities, but it, it involved ... also evaluating grants from the local area...[pause] I've sat on many committees where, like I said, I feel like I had been a token ... as opposed to being really listened or heard ... There is something that if you're

going to talk about the Commission report that I would like to address at that... I don't know where you are at with your questions.

C: Oh, no, go ahead.

J: Where are you at?

C: We can, we can... be flexible

J: The, the... the commission report [the 2001 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report on the Status of Minorities in Moorhead, MN] was – MCARI was involved in that also. But... our community I felt was lied to because we thought that when the commission report was developed that, we, it had some enforcement. That if we testified somebody was going to make things right for our community and we were going to be heard and all of a sudden, you know, you're testifying and you're telling about all of these things... And that wasn't the way that it was. We soon learned that it really didn't have, it didn't mean anything as far as enforcement. And that's what we were looking for as the Latino community...

When, after it came out, I heard, it took a long time for it to come out and I was concerned about that... By then we had done some things in the community where we had managed to develop some relationships between some of the groups that... had been accused, especially the Police Department, that had been accused of harassing or police profile, you know, doing profiling in the, in the community. Victor Rodriguez... is, Dr. Victor Rodriguez, is... just coming off a stint of being the chair of Crossroads Ministry in Chicago. He's a professor in... Long Beach, California. He teaches sociology and Chicano studies... is a friend of mine through... MCARI and so we've had all these talks about him... coming to Moorhead and he came to Moorhead when MCARI celebrated, we celebrated our fifth anniversary as a team. And he came and spoke and he was awesome. And so we also brought him to speak to the police department....

The Moorhead State University Social Work Department had a small grant and the grant had to be used to, to deal with issues... involving children and it, it was Child Protection. There was a child protection issue in the community at the time within, within the Latino community... There had been a family where five of the children were taken from the mother. Of course, the community as a whole – and I, when I say community, I'm talking about the Latino community. The Latino community started calling and saying, "You know, we're hearing that they are going to take our children away." And we got scared. Five children, we're hearing bits and pieces of information and so we called the ombudsperson and we said that "You need to come now. Because we don't know what happened to these children. We're hearing that they are being give up for adoption, that the mother is being mistreated. You know, we don't know what's going on." So the ombudsperson came, and he sat us down, and he educated us and said, "This is the system that has to be followed in order to have a child removed."

And we realized how uneducated we were in the process and the system and that what we were hearing out there... needed to be corrected as far as our community was concerned. We needed to educate them and I said, "You need to tell all the community this. You need a brochure. You need something." So when this... This happened at the

same time the grant came about and we took on a relationship with Amy Phillips. I coordinated the effort. We developed a core committee of Latinos and the condition was that it would be Latino-run.

And so, I was the staff person and what we did was we brought the Latino community in and said, “Okay, what do we need to fix this. What do we need to do with this money? How do we educate our community?” And what we wanted to do is we wanted to teach them, to educate them about their rights, and about how the process works. We found as we were meeting in the committee that we needed to educate the system. Because they need to know that we knew what... our rights were. And the first meeting we had, we just met as the Latinos committee. We invited some people who we thought were friendly to the cause um... Harvey Stalwick from Concordia and Amy, you know, was the person from MSUM, Amy Phillips was the MSUM staff person helping us and... the second meeting we invited Carol Beckstrom who was the, one of the supervisors for Child Protection. But we were adamant that we were going to be Latino-run. And so she was not allowed... to sit at our table. She was simply there as a visitor and an observer so she didn't sit at the table then. And that was something... symbolic also, that we wanted to make a statement – that this was our table. We were going to make our decisions for our community. And at the [first] meeting she came she didn't sit at the table. We had discussions amongst ourselves and, and she respected us. However, the first... meeting she was at, she challenged us and was very defensive and I, we tried to explain that this was educating and empowering the Latino community to make our choices.

By the time that she came, the second time, we welcomed her at the table and she became a full partner. We welcomed the police department and other... individuals from the community. And we ended up developing a piece for the Latino community in Spanish... Letting them know of their rights. And we worked with ah... side-by-side with Clay County Social Services, the child protection unit to give us the laws, write this down, and educate us, and worked with the county attorney... We had the workshop and we had over 130 people there. All the child protection, all the social workers went. It was mandated that all the social workers from Clay County Social Services went. And then there were like 13 officers, police officers, that were also involved in that, and some county sheriffs department... [And we had Victor come.] Victor was our spokesperson.

The night before, we decided we were, we would educate our Latino community and for them we cooked... food, as the event. We did a supper for them. And educated them. And we had Latino professionals come and educate them about their rights, and the laws, and they were given the brochures and information. And... asked them to freely... speak about what was happening. And it was predominately Latino. I think there, we had one white person there... They needed to feel safe. The next day... there were some officers who wanted to know what did the Latinos say about us and the systems and ... because people spoke and, and wanted to feel safe we couldn't share that.

However ... from that there grew some hunger to continue the discussions... about race relations... Victor was an awesome speaker and talked about demographics and he... [shared statistics.] And after Victor left, we were able to develop a small committee get-together again and talk about where do we go from here because we had developed some relationships. And we couldn't drop the ball then because the conference was just, just a resounding success for us. And so we went on and met with

the police department and Clay County Social Services and by this time the... the report [still] wasn't out yet. It was, we were still waiting for it to happen. And we thought, given the success, you know, we're developing relationships within the Latino community, the Moorhead police department ... they became listeners and then we met with the police department and they wanted more. They wanted to do a session with Dr. Rodriguez... and talk about... racism. And they wanted it specifically customized to meet the needs of a police department. And we did that in January of 2001 and that was also a resounding success. It was, it was wonderful. The police chief, everybody was there... We did that at Moorhead State also. And Amy helped to facilitate some of that also.

And then we also did Clay County Social Services. And that was, they weren't as... open as... the police department. We continued with talks, we developed a committee um... with the deputy chief and some officers and talked about... different things, racial profiling. We developed a new... format for how people... file complaints [with the] police department and access. We... we also talked about racial profiling in the community, how to access them... It was a really different feel for them to have people um... who were citizens, especially people of color, talk to them in a different way than, than what they're used to... There was [a police officer] who... said something about... approaching somebody, you know, a car at a traffic stop and... "if somebody's hit me, I'm not going to trust anybody and I go see"... And I said, "You know, you scare me. Because I already know that you don't trust me. And you scare me." And, and he didn't mean it that way, but just the fact that it's a different language, you know, so it was an education... for all of us around the table.

The next step [is] planning... an anti-racism workshop with Joe Barndt... and Dr. Rodriguez with the police department, and that's like a three-and-a-half day – and that's where we're at right now, you know, working with the police department...

We developed such strong community ties with Clay County Social Services and the police department that anybody from the Latino community who has an issue with child protection can now call Carol Beckstrom and say "I have this issue with this worker. Is this right? Is this correct?" And they trust it enough to where, they trust the system enough to where they know that she's going to look at it and if she, if the person feels... disempowered or, or feels that they were treated differently because of their color, it's addressed. The same thing with the police department. So I... feel really comfortable that we have accomplished something. And then, and then the commission report came out. So...

C: I was going to ask then, it is... sort-of answered the one question. It sounds like you're a lot more hopeful and feel more comfortable with ... they way things are going as opposed to when you testified at, for the commission. Is that right?

J: Yes. Very much. Very much. I think that we've developed, on our own, ties and relationships, even with, within our own Latino community. There was a group here, a group there, and... when we did the workshop with... the social workers, ... everybody kind-of, this is a good thing. The social workers are going to come. It was like we had Latinos who weren't on board before, you know, just really uniting with us to pull this off. So I... think that, that, it was a real good deal. And so I'm real positive. I continue

to... be positive. The deputy chief [Wayne Arnold] and... one of the lieutenants, Mike Katsky, went with a friend of mine and myself to the cities when we went through three-and-a-half day workshop with MCARI ... It was, it was easy to talk to them because we finally had a definition of racism because everybody's definition of racism isn't the same. Maybe we have five different definitions in this room. You know, so... It's, it's different for everybody. Now once... it's not about... you. Whites know that's it's not about attacking them personally, but taking a look at systems. Then it's... different because we, we need to work to dismantle, you know, what's racist in those systems and we, we need to do that together because I can't do it alone. And people of color can't, even if they get together, they can't. We need white people to work with us, to dismantle the racism. And that's what I believe.

C: When you'd said that the, the report came out at that point. Then... was that, was there any fall out from that? Did it, did it cause a step backwards with... any resentment or was everything...

J: No...no ... This is my own personal opinion; I'm not saying that the Justice Circle [the Moorhead Justice Circle's response to the Civil Rights Report] hasn't done any good. um... But what I am saying is that it's still, was planned by white people, it's predominately white, and the fact that there weren't a lot of people of color involved tells me that we still have white people speaking for us, making decisions about us and um... I don't support that ... The other thing is that, initially what we, we'd heard some people talk about um... the city is too big to educate the entire city using... the way they were going to go about doing it ... It's, it's, some people of color still going to the Justice Circle are testifying again, you know. Testifying about the police department again, you know. When we have the police department on board, wanting to change things, you know ... We've already heard all the testimony. We know, and they admit that there's a problem. And if they want to fix the problem and work with the community, then we need to fix that... If there's a problem, and there's an... avenue to... find a remedy, then we need to use that.

You know, so, at that point I was more, I think that I was at a different point of, of working through the solutions with white people as opposed to beating them up, you know, without compromising what I believe. So, that, yeah, there, there was fallout, you know, even some of the people of color who attended would, would come back and say, "There's just no people of color or very few people attended [the Justice Circles.]" You know, so how successful was it? I don't know... Was it, was it the white people's platform to feel good? I don't know. I'm not white, so...

C: Some of the ... the report that quoted you... you talked about the, the problems that your children had, had, still had... in the schools here. Do you... has that continued or has that...?

J: My children are all out of the school system. I have a child in second grade who is... fine in the system. But, I hear, there seems to be a point where, it's like the junior high and I, I still hear complaints from parents; the kids don't, the kids can't... speak Spanish

in the hallway, the kids are ... a white kid and... a brown kid fighting and only one gets suspended...

I think they're more careful to do that now, but I am still hearing that in the community. That wasn't completely addressed, I don't think, that... when we had our, our get together with... the Latino families the night before our conference, [It wasn't issues with child protection.] that they had with as far as systems were concerned, it was the school district... It was the, probably 90%... The discussion revolved around issues with the school district. And I think that the superintendent that's there now and the assistant superintendent that's there now are very open and I think that the doors are open to doing some really... good work.

C: What ... What is your current occupation and title... at... Centro Legal, is that how you pronounce it?

J: Yes. It's Centro Legal Incorporated... Centro Legal is a non-profit law office for low income Latinos. And our main office is in Saint Paul, our executive director's name is Jorge Savedra... But I run the local office and I primarily do immigration. And so that's specifically what I do. I am a legal assistant. So... I work for an attorney. And I only do immigration cases ... I work in three counties; in Wilkin, Ottertail, and Clay. Pelican Rapids is my big area in Ottertail County, where there is a lot of Latinos...

C: What kinds of, of things does that entail then working with the immigration. Do you... meet with people or just how does that work?

J: Immigration is, is very complex. There's new rules coming out all the time and I'm sure that with 9-11 you heard about the break up. It's now three different ... bureaus... What I do are family petitions, naturalizations... I work for people who have a relative who is undocumented and they want to petition that relative, and so that's what I do... meet with those individuals, I talk with the attorney and see if... she decides if there's a remedy, if we do, I take the case. We do the paperwork, and we file it, and it's really rewarding when you see somebody who doesn't have any rights come and show you their social security card and, and... work permit. And they can walk down the street and it's fine...

We just started doing naturalization cases... our attorneys are a part of... the detention project, which is a project that says that anybody who is detained and goes before an immigration judge will have legal representation in their first hearing... If there are any deportation cases here... if they're Latino and there's a remedy then Centro Legal takes them at that, at that level in Saint Paul in Bloomington where the courts, the, generally the docs for courts are there. So... I generally get people together. It's probably more of a, a unity thing, getting somebody's wife from Mexico here... somebody who just got married to a United States citizen, making sure that the wife is safe, or he's safe and we just try and reunite families. So that's kind-of where... but I only work with, predominately Latino families.

C: Then... I guess then how, how does a, how does your work been affected with the influx of so many... refugees and, and new immigrants to the area. Do you find that your

resources are being divided amongst the different... agencies that work with them... or have you had any affect?

J: Actually, there aren't any other agencies, other non-profits, that practice immigration law. And so... that's a very, very... depleted area as far as law is concerned. It's... because immigration laws change so much. It's not something that the attorneys around here like to specialize in. I think there is only one here, but they're... expensive at times. Depending on what your case is. And, we are the only one that is... non-profit and for low income Latinos. So we charge a minimal fee, you know, sometimes. um... I have a very active caseload. One person is not enough to... meet the needs... Within the Latino community. I don't get a lot of request for... refugees. Refugees, generally, Lutheran Social Services takes care of them. And so, because they bring them in or, or they find churches to, you know, bring them in and to take care of them... they generally take care of them, so it's, I don't have a lot of the refugees. I... have some Cubans, maybe some people from Honduras or... El Salvador, but not very many. So as far as the, the that type of an influx doesn't impact me. But the new laws, you know, more or less impact me. One of the things that's happening right now and... what we're seeing especially in a post 9-11 is when, if you've committed a crime twenty years ago, fifteen years ago, um... and you go and renew your expired um... lawful permit of resident card, do a background check and find out that you committed a crime, they deport you. They can put you into removal proceedings and so that happens quite often. It breaks up [families], we, sometimes we have individuals who have never lived in their country or, or, you know, as adults, and, and they don't know what they are going to do in that country. So... it's really changed. I think it was, I believe it was in January or February of this year at a naturalization... it was a swearing in the cities and the FBI had just done a general background and not necessarily done a in-depth background check, and over 100 people were pulled from the swearing... in ceremony. That's very, very traumatic for them. So... yeah... everything is taking longer now with the INS, the bureau, excuse me. So...

C: I guess, we're down to the last few questions here, what, what do you see then as the greatest obstacle facing, still facing the ah... Latino community then in this area? What would you like to see change still? What-where would you like to see a change come from?

J: Again, I'm only speaking for myself and what I observe. I still see a lot of organizations run predominately by white administrators for their organizations, that are for Latinos, that they are run by white administrators who gate-keep us. And by gate-keeping I mean that they decide which board member, which Latina or Latino board member, will go to a given meeting or... there's a meeting with police or there's a meeting with the landlords' association or with the school district, they decide who's going to go by gate-keeping the information.

So it's still access in a way, and the fact that organizations are still run... and administered primarily by white people, they're still making decisions about us, getting grants off of the backs of Latinos and... still making decisions where I see, still see, that as a big obstacle. I... also see some positives though. I think that we've shown a lot of



growth, I have a lot of hope that... the police department is going to continue... to move forward. Grant Weyland [Moorhead Chief of Police] and... Wayne Arnold [Moorhead Deputy Chief of Police] have done an awesome job in moving that department um... towards enable all of use to be a full community, and accessing their services, and trying to keep us safe as a whole community. And... Clay County Social Services, especially the Child Protection unit. They've done an awesome job in having an open-door policy with us, and allowing us to access... their services and they're expertise when we need it.

So, there is a lot of hope in moving forward because... we'd like to see the police department go through a three-and-a-half day training and continue their growth. Um... that the leadership is, I think, critical. I am positive, I haven't been... very involved with TOCAR or, but I've heard some really good stuff about it... I think that that's positive. The YWCA is also involved with MCARI, and that's positive. Anybody, anybody who's willing to talk about the issue of racism and who's willing to listen to what people of color are saying and is willing to allow themselves to be educated, I think, has made strides in already dealing with racism.

C: Would you like to see your children stay in this community and grow up in this community?

J: No

C: Okay [laughs] Um...

J: [laugh] Why do you laugh?

C: 'cause, I, I guess I didn't expect that, I, you know. You had talked so positively, I was expecting you to, to perhaps um... feel a little different.

J: No. But, but remember what I said about where I feel my culture is. And it's just in this house. I wanna go home. I wanna go where everybody looks like me, where if I'm being followed um... I wish... the Fargo police, were just like Moorhead, but they're not. I wanna go where I, if I get stopped and I'm being followed, I know it's not because of my color or that I am being profiled. I wanna go where I don't have to speak English if I don't want to, to a clerk.... I... wanna be able to eat the food I want, that I eat at home, and not cook it myself. And just go anywhere and buy it. I wanna go to celebrations that an entire community has that looks like me and that understands why we're having that. I wanna be able to access my music and go to listen to celebrations in my language and basically, you know, it has to do with who I am and my identity. But this is a good place to raise children, you know, as far as... their education. It's safe, you know, but this is not where I wanna spend the rest of my life... God willing.

C: Any other questions?

Kayla, Duane: Nope.

C: Well thank-you very much.

J: You're welcome.