

Interview with Louis Ochoa, Jr.

Minnesota State University Moorhead
Campus Security Building
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Interviewers:

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[MM: Okay, it's May 2004 and we are here with Louis Ochoa at the Campus Security Building. Would you please tell us a little about yourself?

LO: My name is Louis Ochoa. I'm the Youth Services Coordinator] for the Moorhead Police Department. I'm Hispanic, and I've lived in this community most of my life. I lived in Texas for four years and in Hibbing, Minnesota for a couple years and then moved back, in '92.

MM: Okay, so, how did you come to live in Moorhead?

LO: I was born in Moorhead.

MM: Okay. And so, I guess you were born in Moorhead, but you lived in Texas for a couple years?

LO: Yeah, my parents were migrant workers (they later settled to work year-round on the farm) and back in, when I was in eighth grade, my dad got a job in Texas. He was laid off during, he was a farm laborer, so he got laid off in the wintertime so he got a job down in Texas as a bricklayer. So, for four years we drove down there and would go to school. After the beet harvest was over, we'd go down there and would live there for the winters and come back in the summer again when farming would start.

MM: Okay, tell us a little about your work with the youth, as the Youth Services Coordinator for the Moorhead Police Department.

LO: Okay, like I said earlier, I'm the Youth Services Coordinator so I work in the youth and family service division. There's four of us that work there. There's two school resource officers and a DARE officer, or who's now the youth education officer, and myself. I'm assigned to the Red River Alternative Learning Center two days a week and there I teach youth intervention classes to fifth, sixth, seventh graders. And I also teach Red Flag/Green Flag to third graders in the elementary schools in Moorhead. I'm also going to start doing Expect Respect, which is a fifth-grade class, with Officer Jeff Nelson, who's assigned to the Junior High. And I'll probably take that over next year. I'll start that in May. I also act as a mentor to the kids at the Alternative school. I help

them out with different projects or problems that they have at the school there. I'll take calls that deal with truancy issues or if there is any type of fighting, or assaults, or smoking or anything like that, I'll work with staff and the kids over there, to work out those problems. I also supervise the juvenile...work crew here in Clay County. So the kids after school, usually from 3-6, I'll take out and supervise them in community service work. And I also supervise the person that's in charge of doing the same thing I do in Clay County, out in the rural area. So, in my job, there is a lot of variety, which is kind of nice. I don't always do the same thing everyday. It's kind of nice. My hours are 10-6, Monday through Friday, so I get weekends off. When I first started I worked a lot of weekends and holidays, so it's kind of nice to work a regular schedule now with family. I'm also involved with the Summer Youth Program, in the summertime, when school isn't going on. We have a group of kids from 8-12; we do fun activities with them like bowling. We take them skating on the final trip. It starts in June, middle of June, and goes to the first week in August. And these kids are from 8-12 years old. Last year we had 200 kids, so we had a pretty good number. We usually have volunteers that come and help out as mentors, and we always have an educational component. You know, talk about theft or smoking, talk about bullying, you know expecting and respecting your peers and elders. And we usually feed the kids. That seems to help, so we always have pizza to start out with and then have our one-hour of education and then we do something fun for the next three hours, so it's a pretty positive program for the kids.

MM: Okay. How did you become associated with the Police Department in the first place?

LO: Um, I graduated from Hibbing Community College. I got my two-year Law Enforcement Degree there, so then I got married back in '92 and moved to Moorhead and decided to continue on with my education here at Moorhead State. And I worked with Abner, or Abner Arauza was working with minority students here and I got to know him. And he told me of a job opening in Moorhead, he knew I was interested in Law Enforcement. And at the time they were looking for a liaison person to work with the Hispanic community back in 1994. So, he introduced me to the city manager at the time, who was Jim Antonin, and I had an interview with him. And then he liked my interview so he recommended me to, at the time it was, uh there wasn't a chief, there was an interim chief, Gary Landsem. And I interviewed with him, and that went well and he offered me the position then. That was a part-time position, 32 hours, so it worked out with going to school. I'd usually start at noon and work four or five hours a day. So it worked out well. And then when I finished up with school, I ended up getting a full-time job.

MM: Okay. Now you were described to us by an interviewee from 2002 as an "up and coming leader" for the Latino community in Moorhead. How does this make you feel?

LO: Um, it's a pretty good compliment to get, from another peer. I guess it makes me feel pretty good to see that what I do is recognized and appreciated. Um, you don't always hear that so, I guess it's a pretty good feeling.

MM: Okay. Now how do you see yourself making an effort to preserve your cultural traditions?

LO: Um, I guess now that I have two kids, living in Moorhead, and being Hispanic it's kind of hard to keep your traditions, but my parents were always, um, kept their culture alive with the Spanish language and then you know the ethnic food, and...all the other traditions that go along with that. And now that I have my own children, and married to somebody that isn't Hispanic, it's kind of tough to do with my own kids, but we still do it with the grandparents and try to keep the language going still. I put my son, who's now in first grade, started the Spanish immersion program at Probstfield. Which he's doing very well in. Growing up in Moorhead, you kinda lose your Spanish. So, even he's in first grade, he corrects me sometimes now, so it's kinda...my wife laughs at me, it's kind of funny because I don't pronounce words correctly. Or if I give him a spelling test, he'll spell it different because I pronounced it wrong, but when I sound it out slowly, he's kind of teaching me again. So it's kinda neat to see him doing that. And keeping the Spanish language. Then there is a lot of, I know Moorhead State has a lot of cultural awareness, you know and partaking in that and taking my family to that. So that's another way to keep the traditions.

MM: Okay. Working with the youth in the community, do you see them as familiar and aware of different cultures in the area?

LO: I think so. You know, the community has become so diverse since I was a kid. I think with kids growing up in a more diverse community than what I did back in the '80's, when I was a kid. I think they see that and recognize more diverse people, you know, and more cultures and recognize that and I think with the schools and, you know, partaking in some different traditions. I know Moorhead High, I don't know if they still do it or not, they had like a Culture Day, and I know they had like an arts program and then kids would dance. I know Kurdish kids and Asian-Americans that would do the dances and play some of their music, so that was kind of neat to see in the school. You know, something I never got to experience, you know, as a youth myself going to school in Moorhead. So, I think Moorhead...becoming more aware, you know, of the diversity population, I think that's a good thing. And I think kids and youth are seeing it too, so it's kind of nice for them to grow up with that.

MM: Okay. How are you involved with the Moorhead Schools Human Rights Committee?

LO: Um, I think it started back, I think it was Mr., Dr. Anderson back, then who used to be the, um I can't think, the Superintendent at that time when I started with Moorhead, who wanted a representative of the Moorhead Police Department. So I agreed to be on the Human Rights Committee and I've been on it ever since. I want to say I started in 1998, '97 or '98. And there we try to create or try to discuss problems that go on in the schools that deal with diversity and try to incorporate diverse curriculum that teachers could teach in the schools starting from kindergarten all the way through high school. We had a lot of discussion on that and certain issues that go on in school, in the district.

So, I'm one of the board members on that Human Rights Committee for the School District. So, I've been active with that. I think it's a good committee. They've done good things, you know, with the diverse population in the schools, whether it's curriculum or trying to hire more staff, you know, to fit the needs of the children and people that can interpret, even the school liaisons, you know, with more refugees and stuff coming into the community, too, I think they need that. The children could speak English, but the parents can't, so there is a big communication barrier there.

MM: Okay. I just have a question to go along with that. Do you see that communication barrier as a big problem with culture diversity in the community?

LO: Um, I think so. I think it's tough that somebody comes from a different country, just myself being Hispanic and my parents first language of Spanish, just to try to have people, just say for the majority or people from Moorhead that aren't aware of different cultures and um, sometimes different people of different cultures get stereotypes so, if they can't express themselves and tell them what's going on, you know, with their tradition or even with religious practices and things like that, people could see it as foreign and not understand why things are going on, so I think that language barrier is, you know, a big road block. You know, for the kids in the community as well as the schools. You know, a lot of the times, when the kids interpret they're kind of the "go between." It's good that they can do that but it's tough for the parents you know if there's a problem with the children or something like that, you don't always get the full story. But it's good to have interpreters in the schools.

MM: Okay. Tell us a little about your Human Rights Award you received from the Moorhead Human Rights Commission in 2003.

LO: 2003, I think that's when I was probably at the alternative school for a year. Some of the staff there recognized me for doing a youth intervention program that I did with the kids. Like I mentioned earlier I teach fifth, sixth and seventh graders there. So I think just bringing that class and that curriculum to the kids there is something they didn't have before. In bringing that to the kids they just the appreciation that they had for that. And you know we do fieldtrips here, I bring in guest speakers, whether it be K-9, or somebody, um, I'm trying to think. Not Social Services but yet somebody, I'll probably get in trouble for not mentioning her, it's Heidi Hapel. I can't remember which department she works for, but she came in and did a lot of good presentations, talked about the dangers of tobacco and things like that. So, I think some staff recognized that and nominated me for the Human Rights Award and I ended up getting one of the awards.

MM: Okay. Do you see Moorhead as a fairly diverse community?

LO: Um...Yes I do. I think there's a lot more different people here. It's more diverse than...growing up in Moorhead, there wasn't much diversity, I mean, I could think of, I could name the Hispanic kids that were in my school probably on one hand at the time. You know, everybody knew each other then, too, and now it's unbelievable. I'll go to the

schools and see so many different cultures there, which I think is a really neat thing. So, it's really become diverse especially with the colleges here as well. You get a lot more diverse, different people.

MM: Okay. Does your profession and your work with the RRALC make you more aware of that?

LO: It does a little bit. Um, but not only being in the alternative school, but being in the other schools, the junior highs, the elementary schools, you know I'm still aware, not just at the alternative school, but I think all the schools made me aware that there is more diversity here in Moorhead. More people are starting to settle here and you didn't see that before. When I was younger I was one of the few families that stayed year-round to work and took advantage of that work opportunity, so, but now more people are staying. Not just Hispanic, but, you know different cultures.

MM: Okay. Have you ever encountered or experienced discrimination in Moorhead?

LO: Um...yes I did. Not so much now, but when I was young I did.

MM: Okay. Can you explain how?

LO: I guess...just not being...when I first started school I couldn't speak English, so I started kindergarten back then. I was at Riverside so I couldn't communicate, I spoke a little bit of English and half, most of it was Spanish. I would say something in Spanish and would finish in English. So, I remember the kids making fun of me because of that and then I don't even know if they had ESL classes back then, but I remember getting tutored later on. And then just getting teased because of being, you know, different or looking different. As I got older you heard it more in the High School, getting picked on, things like that for being a person of color, or something like that. Even going to the store sometimes now in the summertime, if migrants are here—one time I was buying groceries and somebody asked if I was going to pay with food stamps, even though I go there all year long. So, they ask me for I.D. and check, you know they check my I.D. in the summertime when they usually don't do it yearlong and I've been a resident here most of my life. So, you know just dumb things, ignorance I guess. More as a youth, I see more discrimination, but now I don't see as much.

MM: Okay. Um, what changes do you think need to be made in the community to avoid discrimination?

LO: I think we need to educate people. You probably can't do it with older people. Maybe you can give them some, you can educate them but I'm just saying start with the children. Start out young. Start out at the schools maybe by adding some curriculum or whether it's a class or one hour a day or you know one month you learn about African-American culture and then, you know, Mexi... Hispanic culture, Asian-American culture. You know all the different cultures they have here in the United States and around the world, I think. And just teach them a little bit about their culture and their traditions, I

think. Growing up in Moorhead, you know, it was kind of tough at first with the prejudice and things like that, I think a lot of people just aren't aware and sometimes they're, you know, just a lack of education... not education, but just learning about different people's cultures. Seeing people as different still.

MM: All right...what are your thoughts on the Civil Rights Report and how has it helped your community?

LO: Um, my community? What do you mean by my community?

MM: Well just the community at large.

LO: Okay, the community at large. Um, I think it just made more people more aware of discrimination going on that maybe they didn't see or didn't want to recognize. I think the Civil Rights Report opened up a lot of different issues in the community, whether it be Hispanic, Native-American, or Asian community, just got to see their point of view. With the Civil Rights Report, maybe before it was either ignored or didn't, they weren't able to voice their opinions. So I think it just made more people aware of the discrimination in the community and what went down, and I think people either ignored it or weren't really aware of it. You know, being the majority, if you were Caucasian or white you don't experience it, at least, or maybe you do. I don't know, but I don't think you would experience the same type of discrimination as if you were a person of color, so I think this just kind of opened things up and brought everything out in the open in front of everybody and addressed it.

MM: Okay. How would you describe the Moorhead Police Department's response to the report?

LO: I think they had a proactive response, a good response. I was working there at the time and remember hearing things when this came out. I know right now we had a lot of anti-racism training after this. We had some before then, but not as much as we do now. Some diversity training. Moorhead Police Department has brought in a lot of speakers to the community...through Concordia College, also through Moorhead State. And involved all the other community members like Social Services, the school district and other professionals that deal with the public, and even in the private sector. I think Moorhead took the right step instead of saying, "No, there isn't a problem," you know, they addressed it and did...more education for the officers and right now with the racial profiling too...Moorhead does that as well. Not racial profiling...but you fill out the forms when you make stops on anybody, so you just kind of fill out the different form, you know, they do statistics for that. So, I think...you know, the community police and I know the Moorhead Police Department goes to different churches or community events where there is a diverse population. And will tell them these are things you need to have, whether it's tinted windows, you know if you come from Texas or someplace that your windows are tinted. And I think a lot of the reason people have their windows tinted is because it's so hot out there that it's just to keep things cool inside the car. And a lot of plates from Texas that have the sticker on the windshield, you know don't have to have

like they do in Minnesota/North Dakota so, just knowing that you get pulled over for certain things and educate them about the Police Department and how their policies are and things like that. So, they took a positive response that way.

MM: Okay. I want to go back a little bit, um, what do you see as an advantage to teaching kids rather than adults more about diversity in the community?

LO: I think kids right now, well I'll start with the adults. The adults kind of, once you grow up it's like the saying goes you can't teach an old dog new tricks. If you grow up with either discrimination or a prejudice, I think that you've learned that from somebody, you're not born with that. So if you hear this all your life that these certain people are good people or that they're lazy or don't...or sell drugs or something like that. I think you have that stereotype, you know, built in right away. As far as kids, they are so innocent and open minded, I think if you teach them at a young age you know what diver...cultures and traditions are about you see that. Now, you know the diverse...I can't believe how diverse the community is, I know you said you grew up here and I don't know if you see that as well. But with all the refugees that are coming into Fargo/Moorhead, I think kids growing up today have friends that are not only Hispanic or Native American, some kids are Kurdish or Bosnian or Asian, so, or African American, so I think that's a neat thing. I think kids are willing to learn and to accept and can forgive a lot easier than an adult. Say you're an adult, whether you're Hispanic or Native American, you grew up, you know, being discriminated against, I think it's a lot easier to forgive and accept, you know, everything that's been done to you. So, that's why I think teaching the kids at an early age, whether it's in school or at a different program, I think it will be more positive and have more of an impact in the long run.

MM: Do you guys have any questions? (Asking members of the group)

DW: Not that I can think of, it was good.

MM: I guess, is there any thing you would like to add?

LO: Um, not that I can think of. Just uh, you know working for the Moorhead Police Department and working for the city has given me a lot of opportunity starting out. Just to see how the community has changed and the awareness for cultural and diversity awareness has changed, I think for the better. I think it's getting better now, too, I think...with the...Civil Rights Report, I think a lot of good doors have been opened, a lot of good communication, collaborative efforts have been put together to make this work. It's pretty positive, for Moorhead, anyways.

MM: Okay. I guess that's all I have for you. Thank you.