

**Maria Diaz  
Narrator**

**Abner Arauza  
Interviewer**

**December 2010  
Willmar, Minnesota**

Maria Diaz            **-MD**  
Abner Arauza        **-AA**

**AA:** This is Abner Arauza recording for the Minnesota Historical Society Oral History Project in Willmar, Minnesota. I am in Kandiyohi, Minnesota with Maria Diaz. We are interviewing in her home. We'll get started. Maria, first, thank you very much for the interview. I appreciate your time.

**MD:** You're welcome.

**AA:** Your name please.

**MD:** Maria Esther Diaz.

**AA:** And your parents' names.

**MD:** My mom's name is Rosa Castrejon Santana.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** And my father's name is Aquilano Valois.

**AA:** Okay. Where were your parents born?

**MD:** Both of my parents were born in Mexico.

**AA:** What part of Mexico?

**MD:** My father was born in Cuernavaca, in the state of Morelos, and my mother was born in the state of Guerrero.

**AA:** Okay. Tell me about your family, your brothers and sisters. How many do you have? Where do they live?

**MD:** Well, I have two older siblings, and they are currently in Oregon. I really don't know that much from my mom's first marriage. I've seen them a couple times in my life.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** And then it's me—from my mom and my dad, it's only me. And then I have four siblings that are younger than me. Currently one of my siblings is here in town and the other three are in Mexico with my mom.

**AA:** So where in Mexico do they live now?

**MD:** They live in a little town; it's called Jardin Juarez in Morelos. It's near Cuernavaca, Morelos.

**AA:** What is your age and date of birth?

**MD:** I am just turned forty-one in September. I was born September 11, 1969.

**AA:** And you were born where?

**MD:** I was born in a little town called Cuauchichinola, Morelos.

**AA:** Where is that?

**MD:** Cuauchichinola is, I believe, south of Cuernavaca going towards Acapulco. I would say that it is between Cuernavaca and Acapulco.

**AA:** Wow. Do you go back?

**MD:** Not often enough. But yes, I do.

**AA:** Tell me about your education.

**MD:** When I was in Mexico, I only completed a couple of years of technical college. I didn't finish my diploma, but I dropped out a few months before my studies. It was because the lack of money and marriage came faster than graduating.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** I got married when I was sixteen.

**AA:** What was your area of study?

**MD:** Production.

**AA:** Like for a factory?

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** The name and ethnic origin of your spouse?

**MD:** Currently, I am legally separated.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** But my husband's name is Jose Antonio Diaz, and he is a Hispanic.

**AA:** Does he live here?

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** Do you have children?

**MD:** I do. I have one daughter. She lives in town. She is twenty-one years old. And I have a grandson; her son is two and a half.

**AA:** Do you like being a grandma?

**MD:** I do. A lot. [Chuckles] It's fun. It's a life-changing experience.

**AA:** Yes. Yes. So you get to babysit?

**MD:** I did more than that; I raised my grandson since three months old to two and a half.

**AA:** Oh, wow.

**MD:** She just decided to be a mom a couple of months ago, so I'm kind of readjusting again to being single.

**AA:** Those two and half years really set the stage for later on though.

**MD:** Yes. Yes, I hope so. [Chuckles]

**AA:** That's great. So you only have the one daughter?

**MD:** Yes, one daughter.

**AA:** And her name is?

**MD:** Stephanie Chesmin Orozco.

**AA:** And we need to include your grandson. What is his name?

**MD:** Esteban Palacios Orozco.

**AA:** What's her education and what does she do?

**MD:** She graduated from ACGC high school. Well, she attended Willmar public schools most of the years, but at the end she had some struggles and she ended up graduating from ACGC schools.

**AA:** What's ACGC?

**MD:** The letters come from the names of the towns that it covers.

**AA:** Oh, okay.

**MD:** It's called ACGC, Atwater, Cosmos, Grove City. It's a nearby school here. She did graduate from high school, and then she took a course in CNA [certified nursing assistant] or something like that.

**AA:** And that's what she's doing now?

**MD:** No, she works for Jennie-O.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** She likes a lot of money, and they make a lot of money.

**AA:** [Chuckles] I guess you do what's important at the time.

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** What year did your family settle here in Willmar?

**MD:** My daughter was three in October of 1992 when we came to Willmar for the first time.

**AA:** Okay, so you were married and with your daughter already.

**MD:** Yes, I was. I've been married three times.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** And my daughter is from my first marriage.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** But at the time I moved to Willmar, the reason why I came is because her father had relocated in Willmar, and we came to visit him. She really wanted to visit him. So that's the first trip to Willmar, Minnesota. At the time I wondered where in the world is that? So we came and visited and I fell in love with the place and I never left.

**AA:** Why?

**MD:** It just looked beautiful. It looked like what I thought in my mind of the United States when and green . . . with white people around. [Laughs] And much nicer than downtown L.A.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** When I lived in downtown L.A [Los Angeles] I thought that it was worse than Mexico.

**AA:** So you were in L.A. at the time?

**MD:** I was in L.A.

**AA:** Or were you in Mexico when you?

**MD:** I came from Mexico to L.A, and my daughter was born there.

**AA:** Wow. So basically when you came it was to visit your daughter's father.

**MD:** Her father, yes.

**AA:** And you just liked the area and decided to stay.

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** And your daughter wanted to be close, too.

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** Yes. I was basically raised by my stepfather. The father that I named is my stepfather, and I never knew who my dad was. So I think the lack of that made me promise my daughter that she'll always be closer to her dad – her real dad. And I did that. I kept that promise until she turned eighteen.

**AA:** And apparently she liked it, because she's still here.

**MD:** Yes, she's still here. Yes, she adjusted.

**AA:** What kind of adjustments did your family make when you settled here from your former life?

**MD:** The move from California to here was very drastic. I think there were very, very many, many things that I didn't know, especially because of the language barrier. When we lived in California, I didn't have a problem without knowing English because everything is Spanish.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** So I could work, go to school or whatever, and everything was in Spanish. But then when I moved here I didn't speak English and I could not talk to anybody, I could not do anything if I don't speak English. So the language was a big problem. And then there was the food; I was not able to find tortillas anywhere. There were no tortillas.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** Or Mexican bread. [Chuckles]

**AA:** *Pan dulce*. [Mexican pastry]

**MD:** Yes, *pan dulce*.

It was a difficult adjustment to Minnesota or Willmar. I don't know if it's the whole state, because I haven't been any other place, but Willmar has very tight circles. They have circles of friendships, and you don't get in.

**AA:** Cliques?

**MD:** Yes, cliques. So if you don't belong anywhere, it's really hard. To this day I don't think I have my clique yet. So, that, and L.A. is very unlike that. Everybody is welcome, and they welcome you to a party, you know, and you meet people and you make friends really easy. People are more open to welcome you into their homes. I did not see that here in Willmar back then. I still don't see it that much. And I don't think it is because I am Latina, because I have talked to other people—they are not Latinos, like Anglos that moved from other states—and they find that whether it is Minnesota or it's Willmar it is just very conservative as far who is entering into a circle of friendships. So that was a really hard thing to do. The system of education is also very different, and it was all English.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** My daughter was then going to enter Head Start as a kindergartener, and in English it's hard to communicate. I remember the first month that I came here. I'd gotten so sick I ended up in the hospital and I thought I was going to die and I could not communicate what I had. There were no interpreters.

**AA:** Wow.

**MD:** I was at Rice [Memorial] Hospital, and all I could do was just to sign, and say things like, “Ay, ay, here, here,” and, “Owie!” and whatever I could. It was pretty sad to see that. I thought, you know, if that happens to my daughter, and I need to communicate, I would not be able to communicate what happened.

So when I was in the hospital back then I decided that I had to learn English if I wanted to stay in this community. Because there is a great need to communicate and help others who are in the situation as I was, so that’s kind of like the main struggles or challenges that I encountered when I got here.

**AA:** So education was a really big factor.

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** And finding work? How did you find work?

**MD:** Oh no, that was not a problem. My then husband—well, we were still married—he was working already, and within three days I was working at Jennie-O. I did my share.

**AA:** Now when you’re talking about the closeness of the community - you’re talking about the white community?

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** How was it with the Latino community when you came?

**MD:** There weren’t that many Latinos back then – there were very few Latinos. And for the first, probably seven or eight years, we lived in our own little worlds independently from each other. I knew there were Latinos because I’d see them here and there. I’d go, “Oh, there is another *morenito!*” [An affectionate term for Latino; refers to the color of skin.]

And so you’d kind of spot them you know, and kind of get happy and excited, “*Habla Español* [Do you speak Spanish]?” You know, kind of trying to connect, but there were very few and everybody was in their own little world. We were not connected to each other.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** That has changed. We know who is who. And, you know, I tell you who Francisco is, Francisco knows who I am, and we kind of correlate, and we have everybody’s phone number.

If we need to, we call each other and kind of connect. But back then, even myself, you know, I would not care about meeting other Latinos or know what’s going on in our community or be part of festivities or activities or meetings. It was like, go to work, do my cooking, my cleaning. Do my laundry and just mind my own business. And back then that was all we did.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** So we were not integrating in our community. That's how I felt.

**AA:** So there was no support network.

**MD:** No.

**AA:** Formal or informal.

**MD:** No, there was none. Not that I remember.

**AA:** You came here and you were just on your own.

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** Was that good?

**MD:** No. [Chuckles] It was hard. It was very hard, and it was kind of scary, but I like challenges in life. So it was like, oh, I can do this. If I came from Mexico to California and I survived there, I can do this. And not only that I can do this, but I'm going to change that. You know, this is wrong. No, we're better than this. [Chuckles]

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** So yes, I kind of knew that I will, down the road, do something about it.

**AA:** So how did you deal with those changes, with those differences?

**MD:** I think back then that I didn't have the strength or the knowledge about how to deal with it, and I pretty much would feel bad about it. I tried to educate myself, number one, English. If I wanted to be able to educate others about who I am and why I'm here, I would need to speak to them. And I couldn't. I used my body language to greet people. I used my food, you know, to kind of connect with others.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** And I just tried my best to fit in as much as possible. Especially at work, because people that I knew were mainly from work.

**AA:** Share a couple of experiences from that time when you came. Experiences that stand out, good, bad or neutral.

**MD:** I think one of the worst experiences was having something thrown at you. In our culture, if a person threw something at you, that's used for dogs. You don't throw anything at people. And I remember being very confused, because this white lady threw me a candy. And so giving me

candy means you're nice to me, but by throwing it, it's just like you're calling me a dog. So it was very confusing. It was the first time that I kind of thought about how our culture is different. And I knew that this lady liked me, but why she threw the candy at me was because she didn't know that in my culture it is diminishing to throw something at someone.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** So it was kind of like it was an opportunity to say, "Did you know that in Mexico we only throw things to dogs?" And I just explained that to her. She was embarrassed and she said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that." I think that was the first time I kind of wanted to learn more about the American culture and other different cultures; not only the American culture but any other culture. I always like to learn what are the do's and don'ts, at least to be able to not offend anyone. And the more that I learn about it, the more that I like to be connected with other cultures, you know. So I see any opportunity to educate people.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** If I can. If I have the time, and the person is open, I will educate about differences in our cultures.

**AA:** Did you see your daughter and your then husband having to make some adjustments that they talked about?

**MD:** We had to adjust a lot as far as the kinds of food that we were eating. You could not get the kinds of food that you eat back home. I think food is the main one. We gained a lot of weight right away.

**AA:** [Chuckles]

**MD:** We were living in our own shell, and not like the outgoing people we are. I noticed that we kind of pulled away from our families in Mexico and in California and we became more isolated. We were just imitating what everybody else was doing around us, which is like living your own life and just, done. Don't interact, just be yourself and stay out of trouble. That was an adjustment for me, because I missed that. You know, I didn't feel happy being isolated and then having so much to; I'm a people person, so I missed the contact with people. That and what other adjustments? Well, the weather. I never thought in my whole life that there was a cold place like Minnesota. [Chuckles] It was a *big* adjustment.

**AA:** Wow.

**MD:** I'm not going say that I liked it the first couple years. In fact, in the year 2000, I think I went back to California a couple of times because I was just sick and tired of the weather. [Chuckles] Sick and tired of the weather.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** And then when I went back to California I realized that I'd gotten used to the quietness and the peacefulness of a small town.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** No traffic and, you know, the crime rate, and, yes, even though Minnesota is not, it's not a very friendly place to be friends and to have deep relationships, Minnesota overall is a friendly place to live. That's why they call Minnesota nice. At least, when they see you on the street, they greet you and smile. You don't get that in L.A.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** If they don't know you, you'd better not smile. [Speaks harshly] "What are you looking at me for?" [Chuckles]

**AA:** So there would be an adjustment for somebody who goes there from here.

**MD:** Yes. Yes, because if you smile, it's like, "What? What do you want?" It's kind of like you don't, you just mind your own business.

**AA:** I know that you told me that there wasn't a lot of contact among the rest of the Latinos that were here at the time, but would you say that their experience was the same as yours?

**MD:** No, probably not. The few Latinos that I know, like Roberto Trevino, the older, they were more older, I believe they had gotten used to it. They were living in a world that was already welcoming. And I really see a big difference from being Hispanic from Mexico than a Hispanic from Texas. I don't know if you can see the difference.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** But we are. You know, we're different in culture, different in beliefs, different in traditions.

**AA:** Yes, go ahead.

**MD:** And so I don't think that everybody else was seeing that as well.

**AA:** How would you explain the difference between somebody coming from Texas and somebody coming from Mexico?

**MD:** What I've seen and what I've experienced, the people who would come from Texas, uh, you're already a citizen of the United States.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** So you even walk with this, I am from here, and you're not!

**AA:** [Chuckles]

**MD:** It's kind of like this pride that you are born with.

**AA:** Okay. Sure.

**MD:** My daughter has it. She was born in L.A. and she, it's like, she doesn't have that. I mean, in Mexico, we're more, we're different. When, you know, people are more close to each other and respect like the mom and the dad and the parents. There are more levels of respect, you know.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** If I'm the older sister, you better respect me, because you're my sibling and you're younger.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** And that kind of like is not, everybody's kind of the same; parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles are. That's what I've experienced with the people in . . .

**AA:** Among Tejanos [Texans].

**MD:** Among Tejanos. And the food is totally different. But also the lifestyle; we are more calm. Mexicans are by nature more calm, just *tranquilos*. And Tejanos are more *bulleros*. [Active, energetic, noisy.]

**AA:** So it's, live more by the clock.

**MD:** Correct. Yes. Yes.

**AA:** How long have you lived at this address?

**MD:** I purchased this house in 1998. I didn't, I lived for a while and then I moved to California. I rented it. I came back and lived in it again. And then my daughter was in high school and it was a lot of back and forth, so I decided to purchase another house in Willmar, and I rented it again. And this last time I moved here a couple years ago again. But it has been, you know, since 1998, and then on and off since then.

Before we move on, one of the struggles that I had after finding a job was to find a place to live. And people were very open to say, "You know, I really would like to rent you a place . . ." when you saw housing. And that really hurt me when they said, "I would love to, but the people who'd live around you, they're not going to like you. You're a single woman with a kid and you're Mexican. I would love to rent you a place but I can't."

**AA:** Hmmm.

**MD:** And that really hurts because, you know, I was working, I was trying to make a living, I was looking for a place to live. And that made me really angry. And that anger, I took it and I said, "I will never rent a house. I'm going to buy one." And I found a job where I was taking care of handicapped people and I lived-in for three years. And I didn't make it to purchase the house totally cash, but I almost did. I saved up twenty thousand dollars, which I put down only ten towards the purchase of this house. But I never had to rent a place. Because I was angry, I would no longer look for a place to rent.

**AA:** Where you were living-in, was your daughter with you?

**MD:** Yes. Yes, that was a cool job, because they allowed me to go to school. I worked overnights and my daughter would go to school at the time I went to school. And that was when I got a little bit of my education here at Ridgewater [College]. Yes.

**AA:** You know, when you said about it was difficult to find a rental unit because of the neighbors and the attitude . . .

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** Did you experience the same thing when you were trying to buy a house?

**MD:** Actually, I didn't, I didn't have good credit. And I bought this house through a clique from a friend of mine that I used to work with. And I really liked Kandiyohi, and she just happened to be selling this house, so we did a contract for deed. But I didn't even bother going to the bank. I've always experienced a really bad feeling from banks. I remember one day I went to ask for a loan and it was, I wanted to purchase a nice car and they said, "Well, to borrow money from us, it has to be more than a thousand dollars."

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** They're assuming that I'm going to ask what, less than a thousand dollars for a car? I would not ask for a loan of a thousand dollars or less.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** But they said that I had to have just, you know, an assumption of, if you want a little money, we don't lend a little money, you have to ask for big money. So it's kind of like, you know, you get this feeling of, you think that I wouldn't qualify to buy a car that is more expensive.

**AA:** So it's got to be more than a thousand dollars, and since it's more than a thousand dollars, you probably don't have the credit.

**MD:** Yes. Yes.

**AA:** That was what they were saying?

**MD:** Yes, that was kind of like, you know, what the bank was saying in this instance. So I don't have a good relationship with banks.

**AA:** [Chuckles] Okay. So when you bought the house from a friend here, obviously, that feeling of maybe you're not the person for that house didn't exist. But how about the neighbors?

**MD:** Well, I never know any neighbors. The only neighbors that I experienced really disliked was this neighbor. [Points to a house next door.] There were rentals here back then, and there were just drug dealers and all kinds of people that were, you know, just very loud and always the police was around. And I didn't want to be friends with the neighbors. [Chuckles] But this neighbor was, I was greeting her as soon as I moved in. And I told her who I was and tried to just inform her that I was her new neighbor. She was not very happy. She refused even my greetings. Just, totally a refusal.

**AA:** Wow.

**MD:** So I worked a lot. It took me many years to prove myself to her, that I did not sell drugs, that I was not going to move my twenty family members into this little house—she was very open about what she was afraid of—and that I didn't have that many kids, and that I didn't sell drugs. And I just had to wait and prove for her that I am not the kind of Latino that she was thinking of me. So she was very open about, “I don't like Latinos, I don't like Mexicans. You guys, you know, are loud, are dirty,” and are this and are that. It's just that whole concept of Latinos that probably I wouldn't want as a neighbor. But, you know, then I said, “You're judging me from your past experiences. And that is not fair, because you have not given me a chance.” And I said, “And I just want you to know that I am working for the school system.” And back then I was working for the school. “I am a foster parent. I work really hard. I work three jobs. And I like to keep my house clean. And I don't have a record with the police. My house will never be loud. We don't drink. And I respect other people's property.” [Speaking harshly] “Well! We've got to see about that!”

**AA:** Did that change?

**MD:** Yes, it did. Now, you know, we're not friends. But she sometimes comes and greets me and brings cookies or whatever and, and once a year is good. You know, a, “Merry Christmas,” at the end of the year, that's plenty. But if we bump into each other, “Hey Maria, how are you?” You know, so we're not friends, but at least she knows that there's different kinds of Latinos than the ones she knew.

**AA:** Wow. Well, it made a difference in her life and probably yours.

**MD:** And for my daughter it was really hard, because I remember one time she was here lonely, and she used to have some friends, I don't know where around there, about her same age.

**AA:** Your daughter?

**MD:** Yes. She was crying. And I said, “What’s going on?” She was like, “I feel bad because my friend’s mom told her that she could not go and play with me no more.” And I said, “What did you do to her?” She said, “Nothing.” She said, “She cannot play with me because I’m brown.”

**AA:** Wow.

**MD:** And, you know, I told her, “You need to show me where she lives.” [Chuckles]

**AA:** [Chuckles]

**MD:** So my daughter kind of saw me and was like, “No, no, no, Mom! It’s okay. It’s okay. I don’t want to be friends with her anyways, because she says bad language, bad words, and I don’t like that.” So she was like, “We’re cool. No, no problem.” But just to hear that my daughter is being deprived from a friendship because she’s brown. And my daughter, you’ll see, her color of skin, she’s browner than me. So you could really see that she’s brown, more than . . .

**AA:** Us.

**MD:** Yes. So she, once the mom of her friend’s found out that she was brown, she was told she could not play with my daughter anymore because she was brown.

**AA:** And how old was she?

**MD:** She was probably eight or nine years old.

**AA:** Wow.

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** Was that an exception or isolated incident or was that?

**MD:** It was pretty common. You know, comments, like I would go to the grocery—it used to be the grocery store with gas station—and people would say like, “Watch out, there’s an alien.” So kind of like I’d hear things, like at the post office. You know, “Yes, there’s a lot of illegals coming this way.” Just kind of comments, indirect words. Later on, I became a business owner. I remember I got a little trailer, one of those like traveling, I turned that into a kitchen.

**AA:** Oh, okay.

**MD:** And I sell *taquitos* [little tacos] like the *trailitas* [little trailers] in Texas.

**AA:** Yes, sure. A concession stand.

**MD:** So I got the idea. Yes. So I created one myself out of my own money, I didn’t borrow anything to start my own business. And there was going to be Kandi Is Dandy Days here, and I

wanted to sell my tacos there. I mean, not that there's a lot of people, but just to tell the community that I'm a business person, I'm here. So I called the committee and I said, you know, "I need to know, how much is the fee to be a vendor?" And they said, "Well, you have to be a resident of Kandiyohi or else you cannot have a business." And I said, "I am a resident of Kandiyohi. I've lived here for so many years and I want to be in it, I want to be included." "Well, we would like to keep it traditional. And we don't like spicy food." I said, "You're assuming that I'm selling spicy food."

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** And so it was like, "Well, we really need to talk about it, but I don't think we can allow you that because, you know, Kandi Is Dandy Days is about our tradition, it's about our culture, and we want to keep it that way." And my business was tacos. I said, "Okay, fine." I kept on, my business going. And a few years later, they contacted me, because they thought my tacos, my burritos became very well known as the best burritos in the area. And they contacted me a few years later. And I said, they wanted me to be in the parade and to sell them, and I said no. I said, "No, I will not sell, because you guys are very conservative and I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable having burritos and tacos in your festivities." And, you know, I sold the business later on. But I never was able to sell my tacos and burritos, although a lot of people from this neighborhood got my tacos at different fairs. And just like, "Wow, you live in Kandiyohi?" Because the address was there.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** So that was kind of you know, an experience. But well, the first couple years, my house and my cars were egged. And just it was hard to live in the neighborhood.

**AA:** When they called to invite you, do you think it was a change of attitude or just they wanted your food?

**MD:** They wanted my food. [Chuckles] Well, this neighbor, her son had told her that if they knew that I made the best burritos in the whole world. Homemade tortillas, homemade beans, you know, homemade everything, really, really good. So her best friend was part of the committee and she told her, you know, that it was kind of like they had some experience with it. But they wanted the burritos because they've heard that that will bring people in, and that would be innovative, and that it would look good to have something different.

**AA:** Sure.

**MD:** And, by this year, I think, out of those five hundred people that supposedly are in Kandiyohi, I believe at least a hundred are Latinos now. At least. So that changed, too.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** I don't know all of them, but I can see them, you know, in the *carniceria*—we have a meat shop there—and the mail and just by looking at the phonebook, I know that more Latinos are moving into this area.

**AA:** You're talking about just Kandyohi?

**MD:** Just Kandyohi, yes.

**AA:** And Kandyohi is a little bitty town.

**MD:** Yes, five hundred. Yes.

**AA:** Do you perceive your stay, or being here in Kandyohi, as permanent, like I'm going to stay here the rest of my life or?

**MD:** Well, I don't consider myself part of this community. I consider myself more Willmar. It's because we're so close and kind of make everything work, food, everything, church is in Willmar. I don't consider myself staying or part of Kandyohi community. But I pretty much consider myself part of the Willmar community because I lived there for more of the years than here.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** And even when I've lived here, I've worked there. Right now I live here and I work there. Everything is over there. So yes, I think I have quite some time left here. I've got some business to take care of, but I don't think I will get old here. It's too cold for my knees.

**AA:** [Laughs]

**MD:** So I kind of see myself going South.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** Either Laredo, or just a warm place.

**AA:** So, when you said move South, I immediately thought like Mexico, "home."

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** "Home" within quotation marks.

**MD:** I would. I would, that would be my first priority, except with the crime rate and, you know, I don't know. I just feel more safe this side of the border. [Chuckles]

**AA:** So just to be closer to home.

**MD:** Yes, closer to home. Yes, you can take a bus and ride in a day. But I would like to, my first choice would be if I could make it to be in Mexico safe, feel safe, I would, totally. But thank God I became a citizen in 2005 and I have the option to go there and remain there if I want or come back here in a few years if I want to. So that is just a blessing that I get to choose if I want to stay here or if I want to stay there or try back and forth. [Chuckles]

**AA:** So you're talking about dual citizenship?

**MD:** Yes. So that doesn't affect either/or, which for many of us, when we are residents, that is a problem. You cannot be there for more than six months, you have to be here, or you lose your United States residency.

**AA:** Sure.

**MD:** So that's kind of like, yes.

**AA:** So does that mean roots here?

**MD:** I think, I think I found myself in Willmar. Or Willmar found me or something. It's this connection that, you know, that something in me woke up that defined me. And that probably will not go away. So I see Willmar as being my home more than "home" home.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** I don't think I will ever disconnect from Willmar. And I think because I, I left part of my life and part my heart. It's almost eighteen years, just being part of it and making the change and struggling and kind of achieving. And it's kind of like, you know, you achieve goals and you see things happening, and when you're part of it, it just, that makes you belong. So I belong there. I like to be even though I know that some people call me trouble because I speak my mind. I really like that. I really like the fact that, you know, if the sheriff sees me coming, it's like, "Oh no. Now what did we do?"

**AA:** [Chuckles]

**MD:** I think that's okay, you know, if the city council are going to watch out what they're saying because I'm there. I think it's good. Because they know I pay attention and I'm not going to listen and just agree with them. If they're wrong I'm going to tell them that they're wrong. And that's something that I discovered I like. Not very many people feel confident without education going and talking to people, especially in politics. They think like they're saints or whatever. They're just normal people that sometimes don't know what they're doing.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** But yes.

**AA:** Do you stay in contact with your homeland, so to speak, or family?

**MD:** I've always been in contact with Mexico. I think in the beginning more than now. It was like, in the beginning because you miss home so much and you miss the family and you call probably every week. And then you realize that all your money is going on phone calls.

**AA:** [Chuckles]

**MD:** And then you kind of cut down to once a month.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** And then pretty soon you realize that it's not necessary that you need to call your mother and that kind of a thing, so . . .

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** And then I probably started just calling twice a year. Because you become so busy and you start following more other things than family. And I lost that for some, I don't know, ten, fifteen years, where it was just about making money and achieving and being successful. And just in the past, I want to say, four or five years, I really discovered myself. It's like, what the heck had happened to me? I am a Latina and I need my family and I need my friends. And so I kind of go back and regain that connectivity with my people, the ones that I left behind; the ones that still love me even though twenty years have gone by. And so I kind of reconnected, and that's when I realized that I really never made any good friends here. And the ones that I left are still waiting for me.

**AA:** Hmmm.

**MD:** So I do feel that I'm in contact with them more now than before.

**AA:** So it's changed through the years.

**MD:** Yes. I don't think, if you would have asked me ten years ago, would you ever go back to Mexico? It was always no, because I'm happy here, I have everything that I want. I was very, supposedly very, very happy. But I was very happy with the material things that I had, and the dreams that I had became reality for me back then. When you're young and you don't have that part of your brain that kind of is not kicking in yet, you don't value people, you don't value family. You value money, you value a car, you value events, and just all the material things. So I passed that and, you know, material things are not important anymore, at all, like they're just material things. And so I kind of went back to who I was, valuing friendship, family, God, and all that good stuff. And that makes me feel more happier. Sometimes I don't have to eat, I don't have anything to eat, but I'm happy. So, yes.

**AA:** How about with your family, your relatives? Do you stay in touch with them? And how?

**MD:** Yes, for the most part. There have been some like every family, you know, we have issues where some fights here and there. And probably some friendships with family members that are gone, totally, like will never be repaired. But for the most part I stick to, I talk to my mother or my brothers and sisters and my cousins and my aunts. And I keep in contact with everybody. I think I do a really good job for being away compared to those that are so close. Like in California I have lots and lots of family. And when I go there every year or every other year, I find out that they are not in contact as much. So it's kind of sad, because like, you guys are an hour away, you don't visit each other? I just don't get it. But, you know, they are not . . . that's not a priority for them. And for me I'll always have been in contact with them, and have gone and visited and have called and sent letters and sent cards and just telling them that I'm okay. And I just cannot imagine disconnecting totally from my family.

**AA:** Yes. You said when you came here you didn't speak English. You spoke only Spanish.

**MD:** Yes. Spanish only.

**AA:** What language do you use at home now?

**MD:** *Ahorita* [now]? Spanish.

**AA:** Okay. With your daughter? And I know she doesn't live with you, but . . .

**MD:** She doesn't live with me. I speak when there is a need for me to speak English. For an example, I'm a foster parent.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** I'm a therapy foster parent right now and I have two daughters. And one speaks a little Spanish and the other one speaks none, so both are Latinas. And so sometimes I have to speak English, because of the one who doesn't, but I try to promote Spanish. Spanish, it's something in my culture that I value and that I want to keep and pass that on to my next generations. That's one of the reasons why I became a foster parent. I think keeping who we are alive is better for the future of our next generations. I did that with my grandson. When he lived with me, I never spoke English to him. In the first two and a half years he spoke only Spanish. He understands Spanish and he can speak Spanish.

**AA:** Wow.

**MD:** And right now his mom is kind of upset and telling him that he should speak English only, but that's okay. I will make sure that he speaks Spanish.

**AA:** He'll know both.

**MD:** Yes. It's a gift. It's a gift to be bilingual in this world.

**AA:** Yes. How about when you meet friends or acquaintances outside of the home, like at work or out shopping? What do you speak?

**MD:** I think I would say fifty-fifty, because most of the people that I know will be bilingual. For an example, I have a part time job, a direct support job with people with disabilities. That's English only because they're all Anglos with disabilities.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** So that's one hundred percent. I speak English to them. But any other place, you know, if I know that you're Latino and you speak Spanish, I will feel more comfortable if you speak in Spanish than English. It's just who I am, I am more Latina, and Spanish is my first language. As you can see, I have an accent, and I do not know English totally. You always learn new words, and I don't think I will ever learn English totally, like complete.

**AA:** You do very well.

**MD:** [Chuckles]

**AA:** What do you consider Latino-Hispanic cultural traditions? How would you define them?

**MD:** I think they vary, they differ from culture to culture. I think you can understand me, where you and I probably have different traditions. And I think it depends on what you come from. Even in Mexico, traditions will probably be different than someone from Honduras or El Salvador or Chile. I think that they come from whatever you were raised with. But I can describe mine.

I would consider cultural traditions are my language, my food, my beliefs. Like the celebrations that we have – such as *La Navidad* [Christmas], *El Dia los Santos Reyes* [Day of the Three Kings or Magi], *El Dia de la Madre* [Mother's Day], Valentine's Day—it's a different day than here. Here it is only for loved ones; over there you celebrate your mother on Valentine's, you celebrate your best friend on Valentine's, you celebrate your kid on Valentine's Day. It's more about a friendship or a good relationship, where in the United States it is more like a lovey, lovey partner –female-male. So I do not see Valentine's being so big into the rest of the people, individually.

**AA:** And some of the other holidays you mentioned.

**MD:** Yes, *El Reyes Magos* [The Three Kings].

**AA:** Sure, talk about that.

**MD:** That's probably my favorite one, because you used to write a letter to the Reyes Magos, and you would say that you were really good the whole year and you would really like to get a, you know, a *muñeca* [doll] or a bicycle—whatever you wanted to get.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** And then the Reyes Magos would write you a letter back and said, “Well, not really.”

**AA:** [Chuckles]

**MD:** You lied or you did not do your homework. So you got this little toy instead.

**AA:** An evaluation? [Chuckles]

**MD:** Yes. I really liked that, because I always wanted to see if the Reyes Magos really were going to give me something because, ah ha, I was so good. And so the parents always keep saying, “You know, you don’t behave, the Reyes Magos are not going to bring you anything.” We don’t celebrate Christmas as time for *gifts* - there aren’t gifts going on at Christmas.

*El Dia del Nino* [Child’s Day] is another one of my favorite ones. The people make the time to recognize and acknowledge kids. You know, the government and agencies, schools, *everything celebrates El Dia del Nino. And that’s something that is not done here. I miss that. And El Dia del Madre*, I think Mother’s Day with all the *serenatas* [serenades], you know. You go and sing to mothers around your community, and sing a merry morning, you know, *Las Mañanitas* [a traditional song acknowledging and honoring a loved one; birthday song or morning song]. You know, and have *chocolatito con pan*. [hot chocolate with Mexican pastry] It’s just those traditions, you know, that bring people together and make people feel special at least one day a year.

**AA:** Going back to *Dia de los Reyes Magos*, when is that?

**MD:** *Enero Seis*, January Sixth.

**AA:** Okay. So you have a chance between Christmas and January Sixth to really fine-tune your behavior .

**MD:** Yes. [Laughs]

**AA:** Have you retained any of these cultural traditions?

**MD:** I have. For my food, I only cook Mexican. I make my own tortillas and I try to make everything from scratch: my salsas [sauces], *sopas* [soup or soupy casseroles], *cálditos del pollo* [chicken soup], everything in here, in this cooking, it’s traditional. Sometimes I do follow recipes for the kids that are not used to that Mexican food.

**AA:** Sure.

**MD:** And that’s really hard for me to cook, you know – using what is it called? Hamburger Helper. Ugh!

**AA:** [Chuckles]

**MD:** Only God knows how long that food has been there, you know, for years and years. But I keep the food, the language, the values—the values as far as respecting your elders. Your family and your beliefs, you know.

**AA:** How do they see that? How do they receive that? The ones that you teach it to, your next generation, your daughter, your grandkid.

**MD:** Well, my daughter is not very happy. She's not very receptive of my values and my culture. In fact, it was always a struggle with her. "Well, I'm not Mexican. I am an American." And it was always that struggle. "And I don't want to speak Spanish." Well, you are going to speak Spanish. And it was always an argument since she was little. She has always wanted to deny who she is. And I always tell her, "You were not born with the wrong skin, you were born in the wrong place. That's it." She was made in Mexico, and only by a week was she born in the United States. The culture and the language was a gift that I wanted to give her - an opportunity. I don't know if it was an opportunity or not, by now. [Chuckles] But she's a bilingual now, thanks to the struggles and commitment that I made to myself that she will know about the culture and the values.

She doesn't like to cook. She hates cooking. Pizza and hamburger are fine with her. As far as the values of not dating, and not doing things that make you look bad in the community and just be discreet about things, you know, personal stuff. And don't be drinking out in public and don't let yourself into trouble that you will later regret. She's like, "Let me be." And I just have to step to the side and say, "Okay." And then she'll have to pay the consequences. But it's sad for me because she doesn't have any of the values or traditions that I have. I feel like I failed with her. But with other kids, I think I am very successful when I see the kids, that they're enjoying the language. You know, I've organized different events for kids where they have, well, we go and learn about who we are as Latinos, where are we coming from and why. We are not in the wrong land, because our ancestors have been here for many, many years, even before the Europeans were here.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** And so I have learned to teach people to feel proud about who we are. And it's not our color skin, that doesn't mean that we're less or more. But we have to stand up and just teach that to others and say, "Wait a second. Why do you think I'm less?"

I think it's well received by all the people. I don't think it's abnormal that my daughter doesn't really perceive that, because I'm Mom. And always if you want to try to teach something to your kids, they'll reject it more if it's coming from you than if it's from other people.

**AA:** Now you said that you worked at the school.

**MD:** I did.

**AA:** What did you see among the kids there as far as cultural traditions?

**MD:** Well, I think that was the first time I, you know, my daughter was going to kindergarten, and I just first realized that she was flunking kindergarten. I mean, that's *sad*. How can you flunk kindergarten? Well, she would have homework and I didn't know how to help her. And I went to the teacher and asked, "How can I help my daughter do homework if I don't know the English?" "Well, you have to just help her to do homework." I said, "But I can't." And so I saw the need. The poor kids, you know, they are sent home homework and the parents don't know the instructions, don't know what to do.

And so I went and asked. I said, "Can I work at the school so I can hear what she's being asked to do and kind of learn and help her?" And the director back then, the principal, said, "Well, Maria, if you learn some English, we'll hire you as a paraprofessional." And I went to school that whole year and I came back the next year. I said, "Now I know English, can you hire me?" So that was my first step out of Jennie-O and into the Willmar public schools. I had put effort into learning English and that was my first job. I really enjoyed working for the school because I was able to speak on behalf of the families that didn't know any English. For an example, I had to make calls to parents and say, "You know, the rules are that you need to bring snacks. Your kid needs to bring snacks to school. That's a rule." But in our culture snacks are spoiling your appetite. But moms will make sure that the kids all eat a good breakfast, and by the time they go home for lunch... Food is ready to eat.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** So, in reality, they didn't need to bring a snack. But it's an American culture, the snacks. I couldn't even find the translation for snacks. You know, we don't have snacks in between. We have desserts but not snacks.

And I also heard from the teachers, "Oh, Maria, parents don't come to conferences. How come?" Well, looking at the translation that the school was using, it's not, "*Venga a la conferencia de los hijos* [come to the children's conference]." *Conferencia* in Español means a whole bunch of people and someone talking about how school is going. Well, conference in the Anglo, in the school district it is one-on-one parent-teacher talking about your son's education, your sons or daughters.

Well, if the parent doesn't understand the concept of "conference" of course they're not going to show up, because they don't think that anybody's going to notice that they're gone. That would be me. "Ah, they won't even know if I don't show up, it's a bunch of people just talking about school." In Mexico we're used to the *juntas* [meetings]. You conference, everybody gathers and talks about how kids are doing. And it's more overall, all the kids, all your kids coming to the school. And here a conference is one parent, one teacher, talking about one student. So once I changed that, once it was understood that the parent's presence was needed and it was a one-on-one, then the parents would start coming to conferences. I found the problem, and I helped to find the solution to the problem. I moved through the school. I started in kindergarten and I worked all the way through twelfth grade. So I worked there.

**AA:** So it was communication style.

**MD:** Yes, and understanding culture, understanding different cultures.

**AA:** Sure.

**MD:** Yes. Now in Mexico or any other country in South America, the school is totally in charge of education. The parents' job is to feed the kid, get the uniform and the books and whatever materials needed, but the school is in charge totally about consequences, checking for homework, making sure that the kid is then doing whatever they need to do. But here it's fifty-fifty. So if the parent is not doing the fifty, guess what? The kid is going to flunk, because the school can only do fifty. The other fifty is up to the parent. So there is a lot of missing communication between the immigrants that come to a system that is totally different than the system that is set up in our countries.

**AA:** So we need to make them understand that here there's a need to be involved?

**MD:** I think it's both. It's educating both. Because what I'd hear a lot from the school district was, "Well, it's just that Hispanic parents don't care." Well, that's not true. I don't think any parent if you ask, they'll say, "Well, do you care about your kid's education?" No. You're never going to hear that. And we do care, but we don't know how to care. So I think it's educating both, you know. At the school district it is educating about ways of communicating, and making the expectations clear. This is what it is. This is what needs to happen.

**AA:** When, in years past, not only when you first arrived but as the years went by, what type of relationship did you and your family have with neighbors? What you shared with employers, with people in the church, the community, the schools?

**MD:** I don't think back then there were many churches. I think there was a couple of Hispanic churches. I'm going to be honest with you; I was kind of not into church back then at all. I've only been involved in the church probably for six or seven years, so in that area, the church, there was no relationship whatsoever. At the workplace, it was just Jennie-O, and it was always a struggle because it was hard work. I feel that some employers take advantage of people when we don't know our rights.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** That was hard – especially the piece where they think that they can treat you badly because you are of a different color. And I *felt* that. I felt that, you know, that other people were favored because the skin color. I always sensed that in this community. I never felt that in California.

**AA:** How did that manifest itself?

**MD:** For an example, you know, I was forced to do hard work - *really* hard work - that Anglo girls would not even dare to try. But I was forced, like, you have to do it. Well, so and so, it's just me and she doesn't have to do. They always get the easiest job because they said they can't

do it. And I believe because they can express and say “refuse” somehow, they’re not forced. And you can see all that. All the harder works are going to be done by a Latino or Latina.

**AA:** Does that affect relationships just with the employer, or with the coworkers?

**MD:** I think with coworkers definitely, because of course you’re not going to get along with people that are being favored. So it affects the relationship with the employers and also with your coworkers, because these are the favored people and there are the people that cannot even say, “That is not fair.” Because back then I couldn’t speak up and say, “Hey, you know, it’s not fair.”

**AA:** You know, we’ve talked a little bit, and throughout I think that one of the things that comes out is acceptance or non-acceptance of the white people in the community - accepting or not accepting the newly arrived people, whether they are Somali or Latinos.

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** Did that affect your settling here and adjusting and putting down roots?

**MD:** Well, I think it did affect in a way because I wanted to prove them wrong. I am of a belief that if I just pick up and go, they will keep on doing it to somebody else. So I think then I decided to stand up and just settle and fight and educate people, instead of giving up and moving back to California .... or move. It affected me because it was harder to establish myself, but also because I didn’t give up.

**AA:** So it was an intentional wanting to stay here and dealing with the issue rather than saying, “Well, I’ll leave because they don’t like me.”

**MD:** Yes. It was more like, *they* need to be educated. And I don’t think anybody wants to have to educate people. It takes a lot of courage and a lot of guts to stand up and say, “Wait a second. Why are you saying that?”

**AA:** Yes, it does. Do you feel a part of the larger community?

**MD:** Oh yes.

**AA:** How? Give me an example.

**MD:** For an example, if there are some people that wanted to know something about Willmar, how Willmar functions, you know, what kinds of things are going on in Willmar, they will contact me. I’m a part of a larger group and my voice is going to be heard. I am connected with the Latinos. If there is an issue with the government doing or planning to do something against a certain group, that community, the Latino community, will contact me right away. “Maria, did you hear this? What are we going to do about it?” So I feel included, and my voice counts. They know me by name: the mayor, the police, the chief of police, just everybody in the city. But, you know, not only at this level, but also I know people who work at Jennie-O, people that work in the school system, and I feel very connected with the businesses. I have created different

networks, so I know if something is going on, I can go and talk to this network and kind of pass it on and say, you know, that this is going on, can we do something about it? Can we be part of it? And so I feel included, I feel part of it, and I have been invited to go and educate people like churches or groups. And it feels good, you know, to have credibility and to say, “Yes, this is why we moved here, this is what we’re doing about it, this is why it’s so hard,” and things like that. So right now I think I’m part of the larger community.

**AA:** How satisfied are you living in the Willmar area?

**MD:** Well [pauses] I’m okay.

**AA:** [Chuckles] That was a *long* pause!

**MD:** [Chuckles] Probably that’s another question for later.

**AA:** Okay. What is the composition of the Latino community here?

**MD:** In Willmar? It has drastically changed in the past two or three years. After the raid in 2007.

**AA:** A raid where?

**MD:** Here in Willmar. The Immigration [Federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement] came and raided the town.

**AA:** Wow. Okay.

**MD:** It was pretty strong and pretty devastating for the Latino community. The whole community felt it, because the economy went down for the whole community. A lot of people were taken, and that was a hard situation.

**AA:** Now you said raided the town. Does that mean like their homes or their businesses of employment?

**MD:** Homes. Basically, homes. Immigration had eight arrest warrants that were located in Willmar and then they connected with the Willmar police department. We later found out that they had planned this week of raiding homes of suspected undocumented people. And at that time I was working as a community organizer, and I had a lot of connections with the whole community. So, as it happened, I started getting all the calls. It started early morning like on—was it like April Eighth?—and continued until April Twelfth or Thirteenth.

They would just go in, eight or twelve police and immigration officers with guns and vest chests, what is it called?

**AA:** Bulletproof.

**MD:** Bulletproof vests. Yes. And they just, it was awful. It was really bad. And it happened simultaneously in different homes. And they would go into a house and they'd just ask for papers. They made a little mistake that they arrested more than they had warrants for. They arrested a lot of people that were documented, including citizens and residents who were allowed to be here to work.

**AA:** So they were here legally?

**MD:** Yes. So, because of that, I did what I thought was best and organized people to go and take them to court and be responsible for their behavior. And the Citizens of Willmar against the Immigration Service is still in court, pending. And it's going well, although they don't want us to know. Their investigation continues. And it's probably going to be a long time before they find out, but they did move on with the lawsuit against them for the way that they raided houses. They entered without permission and they scared kids and they did a lot of awful things. I just think that if I wasn't involved with the community the way I was, they probably would have gotten away with everything. But they didn't. After that, other cities also did the same thing and they stopped raiding cities like that. But, you know, that was a pretty emotional week.

**AA:** I'll bet.

**MD:** I remember because my daughter turned eighteen and nobody showed up for her birthday because they were afraid of *la migra* [Federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. The DJ did not show up. The restaurant closed where we were going to have the party. And only two people showed up.

**AA:** Wow. Did people leave the area as a consequence?

**MD:** Yes. Well, about a hundred people were arrested. And then I would say a couple of hundred moved away. And then after that they kept moving away because they knew it was harder. Within the past year Jennie-O had let go about four hundred employees. They were checking their documents and they came out as not being able to work. So they let go of people, and of course they're going to relocate. Also, throughout the past years the Willmar police department has been doing what they think is their job, is whoever they come across with, if they cannot prove they're citizens or residents, they send them to Immigration. There is no law about that, but they've just taken that on their own hands. It makes me really angry.

**AA:** Is the Latino community organizing around that?

**MD:** Ah no, I am probably the only one who would do something about it. But I'm also tired. I'm tired of going against it and not moving forward. It's kind of like I wish people would care more about each other. But if I go and try to get support from the people with papers, they say, "Why do I worry about it? I have papers. It isn't going to affect me." And if I go and talk to people that don't have papers, "Maria, I'm afraid. I can't help you. You know, I can't, I don't have any papers, I don't want to be noticed."

**AA:** Because they're afraid to be deported.

**MD:** Whose job is it then? It's not the one with papers and it's not the one without papers. It's nobody's job. Nobody's going to speak up for whatever needs to be done. So it's frustrating until you just kind of go on your own.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** I continue. I'm part of a group right now, it's called the WACIR group.

**AA:** The what?

**MD:** WACIR. [Willmar Area Comprehensive Immigration Reform] It's supporting the immigration reform.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** Basically what we're doing is it's a bunch of people that are just volunteers, unpaid volunteers that are going around educating people about why reform needs to happen, why it's better to be accepting people that are here in that community than trying to catch them all and deport them.

**AA:** So among the Latinos that live here now, how is that divided among Mexicanos, Tejanos, Hondureños?

**MD:** Well, I think our community is so divided. As in many other places, the Honduran people don't like Mexicans, and the Mexicans don't like people from Texas, and those three groups don't really like each other.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** Very rarely you'll see them getting along. It's not that we're not united as Latinos, but it is one of the biggest problems in our area. The Latino population from Honduras is the biggest population in Willmar. Mexicans are probably the minority. But Latinos from Honduras are the most.

**AA:** Why don't they get along?

**MD:** Why don't we get along? Because I think they are different cultures. For example, I saw that with kids in the Willmar high school when I was working there four years. The culture of the girls from Honduras, they're very, well, they're very sexy. [Chuckles] And they dress kind of like, how do you say? Provocative, where the Mexicans are more conservative. But they don't have papers, and that's an issue for the people from Texas, who say, "Well, you don't have papers. Why are you coming here pretending like you're one of us?" And, they have this personality of "I am hot and sexy and everybody likes me."

There is just this assumption that, you know, I want to be better than you and you're not better than me kind of a thing. And I see that. It is an issue even for me as an adult trying to work with everybody, because as an organizer I *had to* at least try to include every single member of this community that were Latinos. So I found everyone from different countries. And I got no response from many, especially the Hondurans. I probably got two supporters and not more.

**AA:** Wow.

**MD:** When Immigration came, they thought that I called Immigration on them because they didn't want to support me. It wasn't about me. It was about getting organized and being together and learning how to be part of the community.

**AA:** So you think that their lack of involvement was what you said earlier? Fear of being identified and deported?

**MD:** Yes. Oh yes, definitely.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** It still is. It still is. People don't want to be noticed. They don't want it to be known that, you know, they exist.

**AA:** So does that composition of the number of Hondureños, Tejanos, Mexicanos, etc., is it stable now? Or is that still changing?

**MD:** I think at one point we were like thirty, even a little over thirty percent of the population of the whole community. I think it went down probably to twenty percent. Instead of growing, it just dropped.

**AA:** Was that as a result of the raids?

**MD:** After the raid, everything changed. And I think as we hear that, you know, the new government, local government will change in 2011, we already know that we have to do something about it, either fight or run, because it's going to get ugly.

**AA:** How do you think?

**MD:** I'm still thinking. I have a couple months to decide. [Chuckles]

**AA:** What issues have you seen in the past here in Willmar that affect Latinos?

**MD:** Well, there was a huge lawsuit against the Willmar public schools, and this was before my time, so I was not here yet.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** Where they were placing all the Hispanic kids that didn't know English in special education. Someone did something about it and they won. So the Willmar public schools then had to do something to make sure that they were testing properly and they were not calling special education kids all those that just did not know English. Because there's two different things, language and the level of ability to learn.

**MD:** That was a huge one that affected the Latinos. I think that in Willmar, even if your student has some issues with learning, they're really, really cautious about it. They say, "We'll wait. We'll wait and we'll give it some more time, just a little more time." And I know it's needed sometimes for special education to kick in. They wait too long because they are afraid to make the same mistake over again.

I think housing sometimes is an issue. I know we had a really bad trailer park where it was all drugs, and it made a really bad name for Latinos, because of all that. Even the police were afraid to go in. They finally closed it down, and the city had to adjust to relocating and helping all those people. I think that was a good thing that happened. A lot of people bought houses and they kind of, you know, spread them all over Willmar.

We have two trailer courts and mainly are Latinos. I think that the police and the local government tend to think that only bad people live in poor houses, and that really affects Latinos. It affects me that they think badly of people that are poor and cannot afford decent housing. So sometimes I've got to just explain and say, "You know, we do what we can."

**AA:** What other issues have you seen in the past here in Willmar that affected Latinos?

**MD:** I think the major one was immigration. One of the biggest one that has impacted the community was immigration.

**AA:** Are you referring to the raids?

**MD:** Yes. That was the big one that really affected a lot.

**AA:** What issues have changed through the years?

**MD:** Well, there is change because there are more of us. There are Latinos in every aspect in Willmar. Latinos in healthcare, in social work, in churches, and there are Latinos everywhere. And we are connected, either by email, or phone - we are more connected. If anything happens and we need to be there, we are going to support each other, even if we don't like each other.

I remember that last year they wanted to pass the G287 in Willmar, which would allow a couple of police officers to go and get trained to kind of do immigration work. I don't live in Willmar, and so I didn't hear the news, but someone called me. It was like, "Did you know this Monday city council is going to hear about this proposition and then it might pass?" "Oh no, it's not going to pass." So I got out and organized and emailed and texted and called all the students that I knew, and organized. You know, meet at six o'clock; the meeting starts at seven. What we're

going to do is just pack the place and say, “No, we don’t want that, and no, we will not take that.” So I only had a couple days to work on organizing. And that was the *first* time that the city council has been packed. We folded the chairs because we didn’t need any chairs. We were just tight like *sardinitas* [little sardines].

**AA:** Wow.

**MD:** And everybody said, “No, no, no.” The only person who said yes was [Joe] Gimse, and he was the one who was bringing that wonderful, wonderful tool to Willmar.

**AA:** And Gimse is?

**MD:** A state senator.

**AA:** Okay.

**MD:** So the city council decided to table it. I’ve still got to research what “table” means, but it did not go through. And so then everybody said, “Maria, you know how to get ahold of me if we need to.” Sometimes people don’t even know what they’re there for but they’re there. It’s like, “If Maria says we go, we go.”

**AA:** [Chuckles]

**MD:** “Because Maria knows what she’s doing.”

**AA:** They trust you.

**MD:** They trust me. And that’s something that I have earned in the past years as, you know, doing good and then just trying whatever’s best for the Latinos.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** So it’s kind of nice to say that if I want to get everybody involved, they will get involved.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** But I’m not going to call them for things that are not really important. But things that are important, I am going to be there speaking my mind and just saying, “No, this is not okay. Why would you?” And I’m proven, and I told the city council and the mayor, I said, “If you can point out in this group who is documented and who is not, then I agree with you that you’re not going to affect people that are citizens. But look at us. Who can you point to who is undocumented or documented in this group? You can’t. So, you’re going to stop and you’re going to ask me for papers, when your John Smith is not going to be asked for papers? That is breaking your own law. Do you really want that? You already know me, you already know that I have papers, but there will be citizens that are new in town and you’re going to be harassing them because you

think they don't have papers." They even stopped my daughter and asked her, "Where did you get these papers?"

**AA:** Wow. Really.

**MD:** You know, "Did you buy them? From where? You're not Stephanie are you? Just tell me the truth and I'll let you go." She was scared and she said, "I'm going to call my mom because you're not believing me, and my mom is Maria Diaz." [Chuckles] So I know that they will do wrong and then the city will have to pay for it.

**AA:** Explain a little bit about G287 for those who don't know.

**MD:** I would call G287 the mini Arizona law. The Republicans minimize that and put it as a very useful tool to get rid of the undocumented people in your city. Basically what that means is that it will entitle the Willmar police officers to stop you, and if they believe you are undocumented, you have to prove that you're not. As I understand it, there are certain rights that they cannot take away and that is, if you are a citizen, you have the right not to be harassed about your immigration status. And I would not appreciate being harassed if I go to Arizona and they're going to stop me and doubt that I am who I am. I don't have to carry my citizenship with me. I have to carry an ID but not a citizenship. So that's why I don't think it's appropriate, because it would affect the Latinos, it would affect the whole city, and the businesses. The people will move away.

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** And then we lose.

**AA:** Talk about the condition of Latino education in this area. How is it for Latino youth in schools, for adults who are trying to get education after high school and?

**MD:** After high school, I think that the Ridgewater College is doing a wonderful, wonderful job here in town of promoting education and giving opportunity regardless of whether students are undocumented or documented. Education is just like a store; they sell it, you have the money, buy it. Unfortunately, you know, education is expensive and there are not a lot of resources to help Latinos to go to college.

I think enrollment has increased because Ridgewater college has done what needs to be done to increase inviting and creating different programs for Latinos. They've done adult English as a second language, they've done just really, really short classes for people that want to train in something, like CNA For ELL [English Language Learner] programs.

**AA:** Sure.

**MD:** And then they graduate and are able to go to work. So I think that they're really doing good in offering programs for after high school. Opportunity is there, and I see more and more kids going to Ridgewater College and getting some education. I don't know about finding a job after

the education. I have a couple of kids that became police officers, and they're ready to work. They're working as security because they cannot find a job. So there we have two Latino officers. They graduated and they can't work.

**AA:** So they're licensed now.

**MD:** Yes.

**AA:** But they don't find jobs.

**MD:** There's no jobs.

**AA:** How about in the high schools or middle school, junior high, elementary school?

**MD:** I think that Willmar school is trying really hard, but I think that we have a long way to go as far as understanding. And, you know, I was always very open to the principals and saying, "You know, we have to deal with discrimination and call it what it is: discrimination."

They don't want to believe there is such a thing. It doesn't exist. They don't believe in it; it doesn't exist. But I felt it, and I see it, and kids felt it, and so it's there. And it's not going to get solved, because they don't want it to be addressed. But if you want to get to fix something, you have to know that there is a problem. So I totally believe that if the school discovers one day that there is discrimination that the school will be a lot safer, because they can address it and they can call it what it is, and it will be easier to work on it. And I'm not going to say there is discrimination just by the Anglo against the brown. It's discrimination also from the brown against the Anglo, because that is also discrimination.

**AA:** How is that?

**MD:** It's vice versa, it's, you know, not only that the Anglos don't like the Hispanics but the Hispanics become discriminating against the Anglos, and that's the same.

**AA:** How is that? Give me an example.

**MD:** For an example, I used to work with the Hispanic-Latino students at the high school. And I sometimes wanted to include Anglos, because they were welcome to come and join the group. But the Latino kids would get upset. It was like, "No Miss, we don't want *gueros* [colloquial for Anglo; children with fair complexion] in our group." That is discriminating. And, you know, it was hard for me to tell them, "No, if you consider, there's only one Anglo here." And the only reason why he was accepted is because he was dating my daughter.

**AA:** [Chuckles]

**MD:** I worked with kids, but they didn't want any *gueros* in there. They don't want any. And it was always no.

So it is discriminating against, you know, *gueros* and sometimes it is hard to break that. “Oh, they don’t they do things and they don’t invite us. And, you know, why should we invite them? This is our group, this is our thing, it is our Latino thing.” And so it is a mutual discrimination.

**AA:** Describe some more the relationship between the Latino community and the white community in Willmar.

**MD:** I think after the raid, and all of the media stuff, the Anglo community has become more open about judging and speaking against Latinos that are undocumented. And that’s pretty scary, because before it was like they didn’t mind, but now it’s more open about, yes, we are going to do something about it, they’re criminals. And it’s really sad that the community, the Anglo community, is being guided by the media. It’s going towards, yes, let’s get rid of them. Because if they understand what’s going to happen and they’re going to deal with that, that’s fine. But I won’t want to be here if they’re going to get rid of the twelve million. I won’t want to be in this country, believe me.

Even for me, after I speak on behalf of those that cannot speak, I have people that were very nice to me, and the minute they knew that I’m supporting this cause or this thing, they don’t like me anymore. Because they didn’t think that I was going to be that way. I’m not going to say that it’s the total community. I think we have a good group of religious people and leaders in the community that are Anglo and they’re trying their best to kind of advocate and help understand and to mediate and help. But we’re in a tough position. I’m not going to say that it’s bad relationship. There is no relationship.

**AA:** So they each stay in their own area. Are there Latinos involved in political activity?

**MD:** No.

**AA:** Nobody supporting others or nobody running for positions?

**MD:** Not at this time. I wanted to be the first Latina city council member. I don’t know if I want to do that anymore. I have gotten some training through the White House Project, as how to run and how to become involved, and I’ve learned a lot.

I’ve also tried to recruit people that are in a better position with education, and I have not been able to convince anyone to run for anything. [Chuckles] Not even for the school board. Not for anything. So they are not politically involved. They are really scared, and they think it’s a waste of time. They think it’s unnecessary.

**AA:** Tell me about the community organizations that in any way touch the lives of Latinos. Organizations, agencies, churches . . .

**MD:** Well, I think the churches are very, very involved. Saint Mary’s Catholic Church does a lot for Latinos as far as support and understanding and help. Heartland Community Action does a great, great job serving Latinos. It’s probably the best nonprofit helping Latinos in many areas. The Food Shelf provides food, and although they have to have a social security number, they do

get food. I guess many churches are very supportive. There is also the West Central Integration Collaborative. It's a nonprofit that I used to work for, for six years, and I think they've done a really good job in providing support to families.

**AA:** Just briefly, tell me about how the community is integrating the newly-arrived or recent arrivals from Mexico and Honduras and other areas. How are they integrating into the Latino community and into the community in general?

**MD:** I think, within the Latino community, if I hear, for an example, that there's a new family in town, we try to help as far as "What do you need?". We provide whatever we can, like some clothes. And we try to tell them where they can get help - you go here, you go there, you can get this here, you can get this there, and I heard about this job opportunity - just trying to help and support as much as possible. Just telling them what the process is or where to go, if we know who they are—sometimes we don't know that they're new.

Personally, because of my religious beliefs, if I see a Latino walking on the street I will offer to pick them up. This is not racist, but I will not pick up an Anglo because they always say no, so I have learned my lesson. The Anglos will not ride with me. But if I see a Latino in the middle of winter, especially with children, I will pick them up. And I will say, "Where are you going? It's very cold, don't walk." And then I know that they're new in town, they don't have transportation, they don't even know that they can get frostbite. And then I just tell them who I am and I say, "Please don't walk, especially with children." And I just give them a ride. So I support those that even I don't know.

**AA:** But in a formal structure?

**MD:** Nothing.

**AA:** There's nothing.

**MD:** Nothing. There had always been an idea for having a welcome center, and not only for Latinos but that anyone can go to find out where is the food, where is the work, where is the daycare provider, you know, where can I go to find this, and to find that, and help me fill out papers or whatever. It had been just a dream. There's one new program that is called the WAMM. Oh, it's not new, but it's one of the new ones. It's the Willmar Area Multicultural Market. And that is designed to help Latinos get educated about businesses, basically. So they learn a little bit of skills in computer, English and some business management.

**AA:** That is good.

**MD:** Yes, it's going good. They created this kitchen that you can rent and make your tamales or burritos and then sell to the community.

**AA:** Oh.

**MD:** And it's brand new.

**AA:** If somebody from California or from Mexico where you're from called you and said, "Maria, I'm thinking of moving into the U.S., and you've been in Willmar a long time. Tell me about Willmar." What would you say?

**MD:** I would say, "If you're coming from Mexico, it's a really hard place to live. Not only that the weather is cold but the people are cold. And job opportunity is very limited right now. Housing is very tight, very expensive. But I think the worst part is being lonely, away from your family and your friends."

**AA:** Yes.

**MD:** "And it's hard, but we adjust." And I would say, "I will support you as much as I can, but you've got to come with a mind that it's going to be tough. It's going to be hard." But that's the same thing they tell me about Mexico, because I want to move back to Mexico. And they tell me the same thing. They say, "Well, Maria, you're used to living the good life." And they call the United States the good life.

They don't have an idea of what life is really about in the United States when you are there. They think it is all money and fun and lots and lots of stuff. And to me it's lots and lots of stress. There are lots and lots of bills to pay, and a lot of issues that you don't have in Mexico. There are taxes and insurance and this and that.

**AA:** That's what you would say now. What would you have said eight or ten years ago?

**MD:** It would have been totally different. I was just making good money; I was living my own little life more so than caring about others. And I was not involved in politics. I didn't care about politics.

**AA:** But what would you have said to that person, told that person?

**MD:** "Oh yes, come over, it's pretty cool, there's lots of work. Yes, it's cold, but, you know, if you're dressed up good even the cold isn't that cold."

**AA:** [Chuckles]

**MD:** It was different. It was different. Yes.

**AA:** Well, thank you very much Maria. I appreciate the time.

**MD:** No problem. Thank you.