Transcript of an Oral History Interview
with
Stella Alvo
July 24, 1975
Interviewer: Grant A. Moosbrugger

This interview was conducted as part of a series on the Mexican American in Minnesota.

Stella Alvo serves as the spokesperson for the Mi Cultura day care program, a role she has filled from the time of its formation. Working with a group of women in the community, Stella found a large enough group of interested mothers to formulate a bi-lingual, bi-cultural day care program in Spanish and English. Starting in the school year of 1972-73, the participating parents struggled to accomplish their goal despite the problems and difficulties that arose out of the illegality of the program. At the time of this interview, July, 1975, the program is serving approximately sixty-five or seventy children, a number of adults, and has a waiting list of people anxious to join when funds will allow for an increase in enrollment.

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview edited to aid in clarity and ease of comprehension for the reader. The original tape recording is available in the Audio-visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.
Moosbrugger: This is Grant Moosbrugger interviewing Stella Alvo for the Minnesota Historical Society's Mexican American History Project. Today is July 24, 1975, and I'm interviewing her at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and School where the program which she is involved with, the "Mi Cultura" program, is housed. Do I have your permission to record this for the Minnesota Historical Society?

Alvo: Yes.

Moosbrugger: Could you start off, Stella, by telling us about the inception of the program, the beginnings, how it came about and how you became involved?

Alvo: I had been a day care organizer with Puerto Rican mothers in New York. I became disillusioned with graduate school, so I came back to Minnesota, where I had lived for awhile. I had been talking to some people about starting a day care center and one of the things that became quite clear early was that a bilingual day care center was needed. Mothers in the neighborhood were really concerned that their children were losing the language and the culture and the heritage they felt was so important.

Moosbrugger: Which heritage and culture is this?

Alvo: The Mexican American, and later on became more broad based as far as being "Latino" and Spanish. And one of the things that they wanted to see was a place where they could have input into, and control of their children's lives. They didn't want to give up their children to a school. They wanted a place where the children could get the training and experience the parents wanted. So we talked about it for a long time and some people got together and said, "Why don't we start with what is called a 'play group'?", where children come together in different people's houses and work.

Moosbrugger: Back tracking just a little, who are some of these mothers who felt this need, are they community people?

Alvo: Mary Lozano, Mrs. Verdeja, Stella Verdeja.

Moosbrugger: When you say Mrs., do you mean Stella Verdeja or two different Verdejas?

Alvo: One is, well, I don't know what her married name is now, but she is Mrs. Verdeja's daughter. Her name is Stella. Mrs. Verdeja was one of the people who primarily got interested in it through Stella, because Stella was my friend. Stella was working at a health clinic, and Stella introduced me to her mother.

Moosbrugger: Do you know her mother's first name, for the record?
Ella. And so Ella and I started going from house to house talking to people in the neighborhood. One of the people we met with was Mary Lozano. She was very, very interested in having a place that her kids could be a part of. Her children are now in the center. There were other women named Mary Thole and Betty Schmidt who were also interested in a bilingual center for their children because they really liked Spanish. Although they were not Mexican American they wanted their children to be bilingual. We had a mixture right from the beginning, both Anglo and Mexican American. On the West Side, at that time, Urban Renewal was going on, so there was this huge influx of Anglos into the neighborhood. People talked a lot about the racial tension that was going on between Anglo and Mexican children, and that maybe there was a way to include Anglo children in the program. So, we went from door to door. We had, as I said before, the play groups started. We had three-year-olds on Baker Street, two-year-olds down at Torre de San Miguel and we had the little infants in a play group down in the projects.

Moosbrugger: Which Projects? The McDonough Projects?

Alvo: The McDonough Projects. And so we had all different groups, all different places. The transportation in the morning, especially in the snow, was just awful. The parents went through it because they felt, "This is something I want my child to be a part of." We had about fifteen kids in the program at the beginning. We were nervous about it because it was illegal. It was a felony to be running play groups or day care without a license. So we called it a "moving birthday party" and suggested that each of the three groups were having a birthday party, three times a week in the mornings. It stayed a "morning birthday party" until we moved into a building on Baker. We moved into a wooden church. Somebody in the neighborhood must have reported us to somebody from the church, who wasn't glad we were there, because the first morning we opened up we had forty-five kids in this church. It was just amazing how needed the program was. We worked on a cooperative basis. Some mothers would work on Monday, and have Tuesday and Wednesday off, another would work on Tuesday and Wednesday. We had nursery groups for the children, tie-dying, cooking and different kinds of activities. We also had a lot of problems with the Fire Marshall, because it's illegal to run a day care center, especially unlicensed, in a wood frame building. So he talked to us about what we would have to do to bring the building up to code. What we did is we decided to call it a "parent meeting." We said that parents were on the premises, and parents have a right to congregate with their children wherever they want. Everyday we met, we would put a sign outside that would say "Parent Meetings," although we were running a day care center.

By June people got really burnt out because nobody was getting paid a whole lot. I was being paid $25.00 a week, and other people, prime teachers, who were mothers, were paid $20.00 a week.

Moosbrugger: At that stage of the game, where were these meager funds, that provided for these meager wages, coming from?
Alvo: Basically from the church groups. I had been a teacher and knew the mother of a kid I had in my class. She was part of either the Methodist or Presbyterian Reconciliation Fund. They found out that I was working free as an organizer, living on floors, not eating, et cetera. They were really upset over that and decided to give us two-thousand dollars. From that money we gave salaries and wages, but by June of that year everybody was pretty discouraged. We figured that if we were going to do anything, we'd have to get real funding. In order to do that we'd have to get a building that could be licensed.

Moosbrugger: What year was that first year?

Alvo: I think it was in '72-'73. After June we talked with several groups and contracted for federal funding. We finally got a building up in Cherokee Heights Church. There we had two rooms: One large room where we had three, four, and five-year-olds; one other room where we had the infants. There wasn't a whole lot of space, but we had about twenty kids. There were five staff people who were all community people, and one certified teacher, who was the head teacher at that time. We went to a two week training program and we got the United Methodist Volunteers, who give training and insurance to send teachers to Milwaukee to look at the bilingual program there. We brought back a lot of ideas.

The first day we opened it was really funny. I worked at the University at the time, and I sent out a press release through the University. It must have been a day when there wasn't much news going on because all the T.V. stations picked it up. We had every T.V. station in the city there. We didn't have anything in the building. It was our first day opening the center. All the teachers were running around going crazy. It was just amazing. They sent the people to their homes, and they picked up the toys and other things that were Mexican, for example: jugs, serapes, and some sombreros, and had them all over the center. For two minutes this magic transformation went on! (laughter).

Moosbrugger: That was your second year in operation?

Alvo: That was the second year, right.

Moosbrugger: By that time, had you gotten some federal funding?

Alvo: Yes, by that time we had Federal, State and County money.

Moosbrugger: Who was your official teacher? I know you would qualify as an official teacher. Were you the official teacher?

Alvo: No. It was Rebecca Lenawitz, from Texas, she was the only certified person in the group. Our other teachers were Mrs. Verdeja, Mrs. Moran, Alicia Gorman and Luisa Regino.

Moosbrugger: Luisa Regino?
A1vo: Regino and Cindy Loescht.

Moosbrugger: They were mothers who were serving as teachers, acting as teachers, and things like that?

A1vo: Well, at that point, they were teachers. The parents board that we had at that time hired the staff for money. Tillie and Mrs. Gorman had a traveling program.

Moosbrugger: Tillie?

A1vo: Tillie Monita, she was the director, she had started off with us. We had parent meetings often in the community, in different houses, and she was elected as the chairperson of the board.

Moosbrugger: The very first year?

A1vo: Right. Although she is not involved in recruiting, she is involved in preliminary meetings. Tillie worked four years before ever collecting a salary. It's just this year that she is collecting a part time salary.

These people were related to people who had children in the program. There was a lot of involvement with the extended families. As we became bigger and bigger and we got more and more children, we realized we needed to move. We talked to Father Wolski, who was here, and Ronnie Segovia, who was the head of the Guadalupanas. She talked to father Wolski for us. He didn't want any program in the church, he felt the church should stay empty after Project Discovery moved out. Then we offered to pay a lot of rent, so he allowed us three classrooms and the cafeteria. When Fr. Mansur came, he has been really excellent and has extended the rooms. We wanted to increase the number of "parent groups" that are here. He (Fr. Mansur) really sees the church as a community center.

Moosbrugger: What role do you play now for the program?

A1vo: I am basically the outside contact person, because I can talk professionally. I am also the fund raiser and the educational consultant. I bring in whatever educational professional resources people express they need. And I see if I can match up good people in professions to bring those kind of resources in.

Moosbrugger: Maybe you can tell us some of the things that are significant in your opinion, which is certainly a knowledgeable opinion, some of the help and some of the frustrations that you've encountered in trying to make this program grow.

A1vo: Part of the hope, I think, is what I learned from the people on the West Side. They wanted to control their children's lives, they didn't want to see somebody else take care of their children. They also didn't want somebody else to give values to their children that were not congruous with
Alvo: their own. That's really been a hard struggle, it's been one of the hardest struggles of all. We have a society that is very, very professional. We've been accelerating to some kind of level of professionalism and certificism, and refused to look at where we are coming from in some instances. If you look at the basic reasons why schools have certificates, it is to quickly identify someone who is qualified. One of the things I've learned here on the West Side is that qualified people are not quickly identified, and that they're not always certified. One of the things that we say here at "Mi Cultura" is that our people are qualified but not certified. The people who live and work here in "Mi Cultura" are all community people. They bring with them an extra piece of bilingual reality which a University can't duplicate. You cannot send someone who has not lived in Mexico and the United States to understand the problems of that transition. There is a lot of valuable information, resources and experience in that transitional life. That is one of the things that make these people who work here very qualified. We have worked with college students. The college students come here to train with our community people. They are looking for that essence that cannot be duplicated. It's very, very difficult to talk about what in fact that essence is.

Moosbrugger: Nebulous and far reaching.

Alvo: Right. The understanding that comes with heart, "corazon", and "simpatia"- are not things that you teach someone. You saw this morning the grandmother who has raised eight of her own kids and who now has fourteen grandchildren. You saw how she works with the infants, and how she is now learning child development skills, which she uses in her family. They are incorporated and adapted with the things in her experience and her reality.

Instead of taking people and assuming that they are "empty glasses of water", we assume here at "Mi Cultura" that people come with something. What we want to do is to increase the amount of liquid or fluid that they have in them so that they are more whole, instead of assuming that they are empty, mindless people. That's why we have objections to sending our people to a degree program, although some of our people want to do that and we encourage those people, they often come back very discouraged because they are not seen as people who have experience and have resources. They are seen instead as empty people. Because of this we try to bring people in here that have our philosophy.

One of the things that I often have problems with, while working with other community groups, is people feeling that they are going to get tainted by bringing in professionals. One of the other things we learn here is that if you're strong enough in yourself, and you're strong enough in your organization, which we are, then you choose and pick what you want and nobody has influence in controlling you.

Moosbrugger: In other works, these technologists want to teach the technology, methodology, et cetera, and lose the side of the fact that a person might be very rich in life experience and might be keenly aware of their heritage,
Moosbrugger: of the heritage that is to be imparted to the children, and that if that heritage in that life experience is full enough, certainly no harm can be done by the technologists and the methodologists coming in and perhaps imparting something of the value techniques or teaching strategies?

Alvo: Right. Putting value on both those things. One with out the other is really wasted resources. The other point that we've been trying to work with at "Mi Cultura" is having a training session for parents. Many of the people you saw here today are parents who are preparing for committees. I work with them to teach them how to run meetings, what "group dynamics" are and how to develop their meetings. We do this so that the center will perpetuate without any one person, so if I leave, the center will continue. It's not based on me, it's not based on Tillie, it's not based on anyone. It's based on...

Moosbrugger: On the idea?

Alvo: The idea and energies of the people.

Moosbrugger: And the sharing of knowledge and strengths?

Alvo: Yes. One of the other things we have decided is really important is the history. We have written down how we started, and that's why we are writing a book, so that there will be a book on "Mi Cultura", about our life, our struggle and our curriculum.

The other things that we've tried to be is a family center. We not only deal with the children's education here, but we also deal with getting them into kindergarten, health problems, family problems, employment counseling, we applicate people to the Welfare Department and food stamps. We also do a lot of other things that are community based. For these reasons we are not seen exclusively as a day care center. These things are never talked about, we just assume we have to do them.

Moosbrugger: I've asked you this before, but I would like your answer to go on record. Do you see yourself as a duplication, your organization as one which duplicates efforts that are already being made and needs that are already being adequately met by other organizations in the community?

Alvo: No. We deal exclusively with heritage and culture for pre-school and school age children. We are not doing it in any kind of academic way, but more within the life experience itself. We have an after school program where children from five to thirteen come, and we've had 75 applications for a fifteen slot program. We are going to have to expand it. We also run a nursery program to which parents can come and learn how to deal with children. They bring their bilingual experience home with them and work from that. We also have Spanish classes for parents and any adult that is interested, which is being offered elsewhere, but we do it in the context of what the children are learning here, so the parents and the children can work together.
Alvo: We utilize many agencies. We communicate with the public schools, with the Migrant Tutorial, Sister Giovanni, and the Neighborhood House. We are always utilizing and working with these organizations, never seeing ourselves in competition with them. We don't feel threatened by whatever anybody else is doing because what we are doing is different. We see ourselves as a cultural center. In Minnesota, Chicanos and Latinos are very isolated. It's not like coming from New York where there is a constant influx of migrants and people coming from Puerto Rico and other places to influence the culture and reinforce it and give it life. In New York City, one can turn on a radio or T.V. and get Spanish all day long. Where as in Minnesota we have one radio station, and maybe two, to which we can listen for a half hour. However, it's at such an ungodly hour that you can't get it anyway. So, there really isn't any place where our children are reminded that if their parents speak Spanish, it's O.K., or that if they are brown that too it's O.K. That's what we do here. We give children a firm base, pride in themselves and an understanding of the community they live in. For this reason we have Anglo children here as well as Mexican American. We also deal with many other cultures. We have Egyptian children here and we try to deal with their culture. In this way we are trying to make the children aware that there are different cultures, and that we don't believe in the Melting Pot. We think of ourselves as more of a "tossed salad," to which everybody brings their own flavor and culture.

Moosbrugger: Contribution.

Alvo: We create a whole and look at difference as being something very positive. Something that we're trying to van-guard or to spearhead it's culture for Latin people in the Northern Hemisphere. In the Southwest, you have the influence of people coming from Mexico and South America, where we don't have that here. They deal with mostly palm trees and warm climate and that is very hard for the children who have to wear galoshes five months out of the year to relate to. We had a child who came up from Mexico who nearly freaked out when we had to walk in the snow, because he thought he was walking in ice cream. He didn't want to get his shoes dirty, because in Spanish "nieve" is what you call "ice cream" and it also means snow. This little boy heard his mother saying that there was "nieve" outside.

Moosbrugger: "Nieve en el suelo", eh?

Alvo: Yes.

Moosbrugger: "Ice cream on the ground."

Alvo: We had to deal with that kind of transition from the hot climate. That there really isn't a real difference just because we are so far north. We've had a lot of competition. The School Board feels threatened by our existence.

Moosbrugger: The St. Paul Schools?
Alvo: Yes, the St. Paul Schools. Especially Dr. Young who feel that, "Parents aren't really interested, parents don't really care, you really can't get parents involved in anything." To him, they are O.K. on advisory committees, but to have them in the real working of things is absurd. What we try to show him here is that that's not true. So we are living a contradiction. We are a successful contradiction to that kind of mentality. We also compare parents who go into the school system and demand the same kind of control as the teacher, because they know what makes a good teacher, and they understand scheduling. They understand a lot of elements that the school, because they are run by somebody else, keep parents in the dark. We have had parents who've gone to the school system and been angry that they could not have that kind of influence. When the principals try to pull any kind of stuff over their eyes, they just go, "No way, I understand this, you just can't do that." It's just been really amazing to see the influence that we've had on the public schools. As I was telling you before, the public schools have their influence on us. One way is that because we send kids to kindergarten, we start a 7:00. The kids come, and then the kids go to kindergarten.

Moosbrugger: 7:00 in the morning?

Alvo: 7:00 in the morning. They go to kindergarten about 11:00, but when they come back, they don't want to speak Spanish. They don't want to use their language and they don't want to use the dances from their culture. They really have the idea that there is a difference between being brown and being white, which is never brought up here. For instance, we had two Marks in the four and five-year-old's room, and when the kindergarten kids come back, they begin to distinguish themselves as "White Mark" and "Brown Mark".

Moosbrugger: This took place in the St. Paul Schools?

Alvo: Yes, in the St. Paul Schools.

Moosbrugger: Can you rebuild a firm base for the children after they apparently lose it in the public schools?

Alvo: It takes a lot of work, a lot of patience and a lot of energy. We use things like "teatro", which is theater, working out with children in drama some of the feelings they have about their race and their culture. We try to make them feel proud and that, yes, there is a difference. We are not ignoring the fact that there is a "White Mark" and a "Brown Mark", but we also teach that there is no such thing as a "Dirty Mexican". This is what they hear in school and in kindergarten. They come back with this, and we try to deal with it, but it takes a lot of time.

One of the things that is good is that there is a kind of support group outside the "Mi Cultura". We have children who have started to learn to dance here at "Mi Cultura" and are now with the dance group outside. Maria Moran and Juanita give dancing lessons outside of the schools, so
Alvo: that the children can continue. That helps too, they know that they are going to continue with their dancing.

Moosbrugger: When you speak of dances, are these primarily regional and traditional dances of Mexico?

Alvo: Of Mexico. It also helps the children to see the high school boys and girls take part in dances. For instance, we were part of a Mexican Fiesta at Macalaster. First the high school children danced, and then the preschoolers danced. The fact that the pre-schoolers saw the older kids dancing was really good. There aren't many older boys who dance now. Most of them are Morans.

Moosbrugger: Moran, being a family name?

Alvo: Right. They are a family that has been very involved with the culture and heritage. What we are trying to do is to keep it spread out in the community. This is really exciting. It's amazing to see how the little two and three-year-olds really get into some of the dances, and what they can do when they get older.

Moosbrugger: How many children do you have currently enrolled in your program?

Alvo: We have 35 children in the pre-school, 20 children in the after school center, and 15 children in the Nursery program. So we have a total of 70.

Moosbrugger: Then this number could expand, if the funds were there to support an expansion?

Alvo: Yes. We have also been asked to start programs in other parts of the city, and I've been doing some consulting in Minneapolis with groups that have Mexican American children. I'm finding that the level of understanding of Mexican Americans in Minneapolis is just horrid. What they've done is to get high school students who speak Spanish, or are learning Spanish, to come in and work with the children. What they also do is make the parents of these children aides to the high school students because the teacher can't relate to the parents. They don't understand that it is an insult, especially in the Mexican American culture, for an older woman to be put as an assistant to a fourteen-year old.

Moosbrugger: Children?

Alvo: Yes.

Moosbrugger: What are these organizations? Are they formal organizations with names, or are they school based organizations?

Alvo: These are community organizations, like the Pillsbury Waite House. They have a day care center.
Moosbrugger: Another aspect of service to the community that this "Mi Cultura" program provides was touched upon briefly before this interview when you mentioned to me that this program is considered in some ways a model program in the United States. Can you touch upon some of the services that it is providing in this aspect?

Alvo: Well, "Mi Cultura", because it is parent run, and because it's community based and originated, as well as utilizing resources, has a lot of good aspects to it. I know the State Department, and the Public Welfare, sends parents to us who are thinking of starting co-ops. We help them start up their own day care centers. And we've had people from South Africa come who are studying parent co-ops and community run things. They went to the wilder Foundation and then they came here. The United States State Department had a woman from Parliament in Holland. It is basically a Socialist Country and they are interested in a bilingual education because they not only have a bilingual problem but also have multi-lingual problems. Obviously Holland is a place to which a lot of people are migrating to. This woman wanted to know how we set up our program, what our structure was, and how it worked. She was very, very pleased with what we were doing here. She also felt that there was a quality program going on. This is always a hard thing to tell other people, that there is quality going on although there isn't a great deal of professionalism.

We also deal with class here. One of the questions we often ask, when we are hiring staff, is "How do you feel about Welfare recipients?" This is because a lot of people in this community are not upper income folk, they come from basically lower income and background. We talk with our staff about where they are coming from economically, what is their experience, their class and their class position.

Moosbrugger: Socio-economically.

Alvo: Right. We feel that there are a lot of Latinos and Chicanos who come from the "barrio" but who have now moved into the suburbs, who really don't have contact with the life and experience of the children we have here. We really think that it's an important kind of a point to find out. One of the things that teachers in the classroom do is that they not only talk about the doctors and lawyers but also about migrant workers. They mention how the migrant workers are important to the economy, how they pick the food and bring the food to the markets and how children whose fathers and mothers work in factories are important to our economy because they are laborers.

Moosbrugger: You try to maintain a staff that can help keep a healthy attitude in the child, so that he relates in a positive manner to somewhat less glorified endeavors.

Alvo: That's right. We feel that one of the reasons we are here is so that a mother doesn't have to choose between sending her kid to an English speaking
Moosbrugger: Has your organization been of service to teacher training institutions and other educational branches?

Alvo: Yes. We service a plan for teacher training for college students. A lot of the college students come in and work with our community teachers. People from the University, Hamline, and Macalaster have come in and worked with our teachers. Every year we have an amazing amount of volunteers who want to work in this center, because it's bilingual. They get a chance to use their Spanish and learn about the culture. You find that the schools don't offer that kind of experience, culture and history in terms of living, dynamic, relevant experience, so we do that for the college students here. We even have people who are faculty people at the University come and work here so that they can say that they had some input in "Mi Cultura", and they have. A lot of them have been good trainers and it's kind of a prestigious thing to have worked with "Mi Cultura".

Moosbrugger: Can we just say for the benefit of the person who will be reading the transcript of this oral interview, that "culture", as you use it, should be viewed not only as the culture and heritage as coming from the parent nation of the people who are being served, primarily Mexico on your instance, but also the culture in the sense of today's culture, the culture of the recent past, the very full and multi-faceted sense, of which you use the word "culture"?

Alvo: Yes. I think that culture has no time span. I think that culture takes in how you set your table, how you eat dinner with your family and what kinds of things people bring from the migrant camps. In the way they do things, in the way they set things up, in the difficulties of maintaining...
Alvo: one household, of being in the same place for a long period of time. Culture has in it every facet of your life. It's what you put your values on and it's how you proceed in the world. As I understand it, Polish people put a whole lot of value on land, and so they don't have a lot of professionals, but they have a lot of land owners. Even though these are people who don't speak Polish or don't understand their culture, they still carry with them a lot of values. That's something in people, I think Americans have really worked hard to do away with. There is a lot of history with how Ford has his English classes and where he made people coming in do away with their old customs. You know the idea of sending out social workers to the homes of the migrant workers, and making sure that they weren't using garlic or using any of the old things, and having a graduation where he had people in their ragged clothes walking off a ship, and then on this huge stage having people walking into this pot and having the teachers stir the pot and then having all the students and workers from his factory come out waving American flags? That kind of mentality really permeates a lot of our society, pushing away a lot of where people are coming from.

Moosbrugger: In attempt to be, in effect, a "Melting Pot".

Alvo: Right. The reality in the situation is that the values of where the people are coming from, of what your parents put value on, you're not to. You can't be divorced from it. I really believe that strongly. Those who have, in my opinion, have such an empty life that it seems like a death culture, rather than a culture of life and enrichment, which being Spanish is a part of. I mean being Spanish, Mexican, and Latino has so much excitement to it, in the music and in the colors, and the way you look at life, and the enjoyment of living. So many people who are into this McDonald culture are just, I don't know, I see it as part of death.

Moosbrugger: Which culture?

Alvo: McDonald, humburger. (Laughter)

Moosbrugger: Oh, the McDonald culture, O.K.

Alvo: And I see that they really should be grabbing back the culture, because I think that if each person respected their own culture, we would be in a better place. I've worked at the University and I've trained nursery-teachers, and I know this is off the subject of "Mi Cultura", but...

Moosbrugger: No, I've wanted to get to that. Yes, why don't you give us your brief background? You've certainly been a prime mover as the story unfolded. I see you as a prime mover and a guidance to this program, and I find you very important. I realize that your thrust is to make this a self regenerating program, which is a wise and prudent position, but I think you were a prime mover and I'd like to perhaps touch upon your history.
Alvo: O.K. I was just going to go into the thing about working with nursery school teachers and social workers at the University and finding out the point of view that these teachers come out with. It is going in and working with, quote "deprived children", as if there is something that Mexican children have, some kind of deprivation of, and not realizing that the life of the people, even though they don't have a whole lot of things in terms of college graduation standards, like color T.V. and washing machines, have a happy life. There's a full life, there is a richness of your community, there is a richness of your culture. A lot of these college students don't know their own culture, so they can't have anything to relate back to. They come in with the whole "White Missionary" attitude. They are going to "civilize the pagans". Little do they know that the people who are poor or don't have the money, may have little money, but have a very rich life. They don't come with the attitude that they can be open and learn from the people who are here. That has a lot to do with the kind of professional mentality of the people coming in to another people's culture. I think that the logic may not be there, but I think that we are leaving ourselves open for a Fascist society, if we don't get back to our respective cultures and find out where our values come from. I can relate to your culture, coming from mine, and you can relate to mine, coming from yours, but if you don't know yours, then you are going to have a hard time dealing with me, because you are not going to understand my values. It's like, I have come from a very poor background, my parents aren't wealthy, they are very poor. I have grown up in New York City and I spoke Spanish when I went into kindergarten, but lost it. Now I am learning again how to speak Spanish. I remember feeling my grandmother was dumb because she spoke Spanish, or being ashamed of my grandmother to take my friends home, you know, to have my friends talk with my grandmother because, "God, she was a weird lady." My grandmother speaks thirteen languages, but English she does not speak so well. And since I've learned that she is an incredible woman and have really gotten my eyes open, as to where I was coming from and what the schools have done to brainwash me. And you know, my mother is an illiterate. She only has a third grade education, but has learned to survive and live in such a way that she is just an amazing woman. I mean I just have a lot of respect for her ability to be able to live. Like, she can not read, and when she goes into a grocery store and she is looking for something that you have to read, she'll go to somebody and say, "Excuse me, I left my reading glasses at home, could you please read this for me?"

Moosbrugger: Good survival tactics. There is no doubt that a lot of education is not formal, it is education through life's experience.

Alvo: Oh, yes. That's basically where a lot of my orientation comes from. My parents, my home, and seeing that college students and people coming in from the University often times don't have survival skills. You put them in a city they are not familiar with and they will fall apart. That's the amazing kind of thing for me to see. But I have learned and have
Alvo: taken from my culture. This is part of their culture. I have a lot of patience, tolerance, and understanding, you know, their tolerance, I have had an easier access moving in and out of different cultures and different economic classes. Like, I have been to Washington and testified in front of professional committees, and I can rap that professional talk, but I can also come and drink beer in somebody's back yard and relate to them.

Moosbrugger: Testifying for a professional committee, did this have anything to do with education of this type?

Alvo: It had to do with day care. When they were cutting funds. Another thing that "Mi Cultura" has done is been very active in politics. One of the first things that we did was get our people on the "Four C's", which is the Council for Coordinated Child Care, so that we had information as to what is going on. Nobody is going to look out for your interests, so you have to look out for your own. I sat on a state advisory committee to child care so that we had information back and forth as to what was going on. We've always dealt with the power kinds of things, and I was sent from here to bring word about the kind of day care we are doing here and the need for it. A result for "Mi Cultura", which I think is really important, is that we worked on State Legislation. Minnesota is the only State in the country that has legislation which provides start-up monies for parent co-ops. We did that not because we needed money for parent co-ops, but because we had the experience of what the difficulty is in getting funding. You need the funds to get the license, you need the license to get the building, you need the building to get the funds, and in Minnesota, they license buildings, they don't license programs. So if you don't have the rent, you can't get your license, and if you don't get your license, you can't get money, and if you don't, it's a "Catch 22".

Moosbrugger: Right, so if you don't have someone who has "organizational Moxie", let's call it, then the average, uninformed parent, would meet only with frustration and disappointment. So it takes someone who knows how to work through the ins and outs of the bureaucracy.

Alvo: To do it, right.

Moosbrugger: And I think you have provided this type of leadership.

Alvo: Some of it. But...

Moosbrugger: What is some of your educational background?

Alvo: Let me just finish this idea of legislation, because I think that people often times overlook legislation or state legislation to deal with some of the bureaucratic problems. So what we did is we went to a source higher than city or county. We went to the state. We lobbied so that 10%
Alvo: of all money allocated for child care goes to parent co-ops. We said that we felt it was important that not only churches and corporations have enough capital to start up a day care center, but so did parents. As a result of that legislation, like last year, eight new parent co-ops started across the state. Although we won't benefit from it directly, we feel that the more parent co-ops there are, the more people there are to support...

Moosbrugger: The idea.

Alvo: Our idea.

Moosbrugger: Excellent.

Alvo: My experience: I basically grew up in the streets of New York fighting. In New York there were street gangs that I, that women, ran with. I had to fight my way through school. I learned to fight my way through everything I wanted. If I wanted to go to school, my parents said that was nice, but they thought it would be better if I were a secretary. But I decided that I wanted to go to school. I got my B.A. in Economics and Advanced Mathematics and then went on to graduate school in Economics and became disillusioned. I came here and worked and now I am trying to get into law school. I really like working with legislation and I feel there are no bilingual lawyers. There are no women bilingual lawyers who can work with women's problems, especially a Hispanic woman who comes with different experiences. I just feel with the way I can speak in both languages, my inside interest in both types of life, that I can make some kind of defense.

Moosbrugger: Well, is there any aspect that we haven't covered that we should go through for posterity?

Alvo: Only, you know, that the resources in the community are very vital. I am most articulate and I am most in keeping with what is accepted, and so people look at me as being a prime mover. I have a lot of difficulties with that because I think that I could not have done anything without the people here. I have learned I have become more tremendous and more of a person because of what I have learned from the skills of the people here. Often times the people here are overlooked, because they can't put things the way that I can, so I feel that basically my voice, my heart and energy is merely some of their reflection. I don't speak for them, but a lot of what I am, a lot of my parts, are a part of what they are.

Moosbrugger: Reflects their input into your life experience.

Alvo: Right, and so I feel that, you know, whoever would be listening to really look back to the people, that often times people get carried away and try to get into education for reasons that are self serving or self indulgent. The important part that I see is the energies and lives of the people,
Alvo: that we really are a part of one whole. We are a body of people and we really have to assert ourselves in that direction. I think until we can build a country that way, basically on the way that "Mi Cultura" works, with the technology and the life and the heart, that we'd be in a better place than we are now.

Moosbrugger: Well, thank you for a beautiful interview that reflects the community and the people and the "Mi Cultura" program.

Alvo: Thank you!