

**Idalia “Charly” Leuze
Narrator**

**Ruth Trevino
Interviewer**

**Willmar, Minnesota
August 11, 2009**

Idalia “Charly” Leuze - **IL**
Ruth Trevino - **RT**

RT: Today I am interviewing Charly Leuze, and we are meeting at Northern Grounds on August 11, 2009. We will just go ahead and start the interview now. Why don't you start at the beginning if you just want to give a quick introduction about yourself.

IL: My name is Idalia, but I also go by the name Charly Leuze. That is my Willmar name. I have lived in Willmar for thirty-seven years now. Quite a long time.

RT: Did you grow up here in Willmar?

IL: We actually moved to Willmar back in 1971, and I started seventh grade in Willmar.

RT: Where did you move from?

IL: Actually we lived in Litchfield, Minnesota, for two years before that. And before that . . . before Litchfield, we moved from San Antonio, Texas.

RT: Do you identify more with Texas or Minnesota?

IL: Well, as much as I want to deny that I identify with the culture here, it would be wrong of me to say that. It did shape me somewhat. There was no Latino culture in Willmar back in 1971 or 1972. I mean, there were migrant workers. They would come in summertime, but that is the only time we saw some diversity. Maybe in the springtime in the schools there was some, but everything revolved around northern European culture. Everything.

RT: So your earliest memories are from San Antonio and growing up down there?

IL: Yes, sure, I love it. I love it. It was more . . . it was home. It was more diverse. You were surrounded by people that look like you. And who spoke Spanish as well as English, and had the same traditions. And there were familiar festivals and foods and things like that. And then you come up here and you are a total foreigner. I mean, nobody has any idea what a tamale is, or anything like that. So you are left to wonder, should I

share that or should I not? And often in that situation you really don't know how much to share.

RT: So your family initially moved to Litchfield. What drew your family to Minnesota from Texas?

IL: Well, believe it or not, my mom had twelve children with my father. And for some reason they just couldn't get along with the kids or something in their marriage. She decided that she wanted a separation and she came up here. My oldest sister was already living in Litchfield, and she was working at Jennie-O Turkey Store. Back then they needed workers. So we had a place to arrive and work.

RT: So who went to work?

IL: My mother came, and my older brothers and sisters went to work. And the younger ones, who were school age, went to school.

RT: What was the name of your sister who lived in Litchfield?

IL: Maria.

RT: Was she the oldest?

IL: Yes, she is the oldest.

RT: She's the oldest. So you have an oldest brother?

IL: Yes.

RT: And how many of your siblings initially came to work?

IL: Three of them, and with her it would be four.

RT: So it was Maria, your mother and three other siblings?

IL: Right.

RT: Okay, so that means eight remaining siblings or eight remaining children went to school in Litchfield. Were they in the public schools?

IL: Some of them were, but some were not here.

RT: Okay. So the other ones stayed back with your dad.

IL: Yes. Two of them stayed with my dad. Two always did.

RT: Okay.

RT: So what moved you from Litchfield to Willmar?

IL: Boy, you know, back then actually what was happening was that they were going to close the Litchfield plant—the Jennie-O plant in Litchfield. They wanted to have a much bigger plant, and to build the bigger plant here in Willmar. So that's why my mom decided to move here. There was housing available. There were some perks for migrant workers or for people who worked at Jennie-O Turkey Store.

RT: The people, who worked at Jennie-O Turkey store, were they migrant workers or were they people who worked there year round?

IL: Some were living here, and some came just for six months. You know back then it was still quite a mobile Latino community. Many people were moving and going back and forth.

RT: What were some of the major differences you saw when you compared a place like Willmar, Minnesota, in general to Texas?

IL: Oh, there were so many. I think the food was one. You know, trying to get to adjust to whatever was available here to eat. It wasn't much. I remember my mother ordering all her things from somebody that would travel to Chicago, so that she could make her traditional tamales and things like that. Otherwise, she couldn't find any foods here in the stores. There was nothing back then. You know, that was one of the biggest things we missed. And, obviously, not having any of your traditions or having other families to speak to.

RT: What traditions do you remember initially missing out on?

IL: Well, when we were in Texas we were raised Catholic, so we missed going to the churches and things like that. The dances, the Quinceañera, if you were invited to one. There was nothing like that. Everything revolved around other cultures. And it was so bad that we came here in the wintertime—in December. Trying to adjust to the cold climate was weird. It was always like my fingers were freezing. I didn't know why, but they were freezing, and they just felt weird. They just felt cold. Very cold. But, since we were the only Latino family, we found lots of very nice people. They would say, "You need to wear mittens, it's ten below outside." Oh, okay . . . a hat and a good winter jacket. So those were real different things. Obviously, the weather was horrible—January, February. And that was really depressing, that was sad. I thought that was only going to last a month or whatever. But it kept going.

RT: Do you think you were a little insulated from some of the culture shock because you had a good portion of your family with you?

IL: Well, I don't know. Yes and no. When we were together, it was great because we were a big family. But outside that family it was tough because it was hard to find anyone to talk to. I mean, there weren't many other Latinos at that time. I had friends, but they were all Anglo friends. Some were very nice, but that still was different. It was different to bring them to my house to get to know my parents, and then there was some of that reservation from their parents that existed. To some extent, there was the sense that they felt, "Should we trust these people? What are these Latino people like?"

RT: How did you experience those reservations from the parents? What is an example?

IL: I remember my girlfriend saying her mother told her to watch out and be careful with that Latino girl because they like to drink a lot. They like to get in trouble. Of course, nothing was further from the truth. But she was a great friend and actually still is, and of course her mother came around eventually. It has to do with building relationships, friendships.

RT: You are talking about what the differences were, the many differences. What were some of the differences you experienced in terms of the school system or how the family dynamics were?

IL: The school system was wonderful. I can't say enough good things about it. The reason for that was that we were just one family. There might have been another family, but I believe they were Latino and Native American. And we didn't talk a lot; in fact, we were real quiet. But in spite of the differences in school, the teachers were great.

The students were a little curious. And that's where the name "Charly" comes about. It was when they asked about my name. Like, what's that name, what kind of name is that? But at that time the television program called "Charlie's Angels" came out—later on in the 1970s—and I wanted to be a private investigator. So my white friend said, "Let's just name you and give you a nickname so that you fit in with everybody else." And, you know, in junior high who doesn't want to fit in? So I said, "Okay, with you I'll be Charly, but in my home and with my Latino people and my family, I will be Idalia." So that name stuck.

We did everything, but everything had to do with Northern European culture. Skiing, anything that had to do with winter time was their type of sports: cross country, snowmobiling, that kind of stuff. And that was hard because I was always cold, always freezing, never wanting to go out. So you have to learn how to dress for the weather. And then, obviously, you have to learn how not to be so stupid about it—to understand how to dress for activities at school, for example. Most of the teachers were great. There were some that were indifferent, but not too bad.

RT: That was when you initially got here. Did things get worse when you were in school? I mean you keep saying you were the only family there. When did you start feeling as though maybe you weren't the only one—the only Latino family? Did that happen while you were in school?

IL: No. There were some in high school. Some families would come in April and May, and then we would have some more Latino kids, and then were additional families.

RT: And by that time you were here in the Willmar school district?

IL: Oh, yes, always. Then again in the summertime we would see Hispanic families and my mom would talk to them. And I would talk to them. And just discover how fun it was to have people that looked like you and that have similar likes, as far as your food and Cinco de Mayo. Come on, nobody here had heard about Cinco de Mayo back then. So that's what was happening.

RT: Did you ever feel that maybe you were a little too different from the Latinos that came up during the summertime?

IL: Sure. We were not migrant workers. We didn't work in the fields. I remember people asking me if we were migrant workers. I had no idea what that was back then. And then they would say, "do you work in the fields, do you pick rocks or do things like that?" I would say, "no, my mom works at the Jennie-O Turkey store. And back then they called it something else - farmer's produce, I think, or something like that. That was when Earl B. Olson started the Turkey Company. Things were much simpler, too.

RT: What do you mean by that?

IL: Well, things were not as diverse. I mean now we have wonderful diversity. Back then everything was similar, northern European culture everywhere. Downtown Willmar, all those stores are still here. I remember my husband bought my wedding ring and engagement ring at Setterberg Jewelers. We just found the bill the other day. The engagement ring bill. And things like that. And now you see more diversity, which I like. I love it.

RT: So you grew up here in Willmar, you've lived here pretty much the majority of your life now. And you just mentioned your husband. Is also from the Willmar area?

IL: He is from Raymond, Minnesota.

RT: Born and raised?

IL: Yes. That is about ten miles west of here.

RT: So did he come to Willmar High School? How did you meet your husband?

IL: We both worked the afternoon shift after school at Jennie-O Turkey Store, cleaning. I would clean offices and he was in another department. And that is where we met. And people do ask me that a lot, too—if there was a variety of men to date. To be honest there wasn't. They were all Anglo men. There were no Latino men to date back then. But if we can back up, I remember the Willmar 8. The strike. I remember those issues going on

back then. Women fighting for their rights, equal rights, equal work for equal pay. Things like that.

RT: How old were you when that happened?

IL: I was twelve. I remember that. I remember that the ladies that worked at the bank, at Citizen's Bank, came to talk to us during our communications class, and they spoke about their side of the story. And I thought that was so different. And here they were on strike outside in the middle of winter wearing snowsuits, boots, and all that. They're crazy! I wouldn't do that. But I remember that and I tell my kids that story. Those things that happened in Willmar back in those days.

RT: So what was the concept of women's rights? What was the conversation like at home?

IL: For us I think it was my mom wanting to know more information. Why are they striking? What's the deal? What's happening? And her not understanding how they could actually do that.

RT: Your mom wanted to know what was going on.

IL: Right. She never learned to speak English even though she understood quite a bit. And back then we didn't have all of the things we do now, like email, cell phones, and things like that. We just had landlines. [Laughs] And also in the Latino community, you know how we are. We tell each other things, what is going on. Most of the people that would hear about it or talk about it were at her work. But the Latino community still was pretty insulated and not knowing what was happening. Whatever Latino community was here at that time.

RT: How big do you think the Latino community was when you were growing up?

IL: From 1972-1979. I graduated in 1982. Maybe there were a hundred families. Maybe, though I really doubt that even. As you get older you start to notice different things, and I remember going out to the college and finding that there was another Latina gal in my class. And that was still back in 1986. She wasn't from around here.

RT: Oh, she wasn't

IL: No. I have no idea where she came from. Somewhere around here. Some town around here, but not Willmar. Yes, but that was it for a long, long time. I do remember that back in the 1970s—1977, 1978—we had a small influx of men from Iran. How they ended up in Willmar, I don't really remember, except to go to college. They would flaunt a lot of money. They were the ones that started driving the Trans Am, the car, the Pontiac Trans Am. They would all drive Pontiac Trans Ams, and that was like a big diversity story. Wow, who are those people and what are they doing here? What are these Iranians doing here? And so that was interesting and everybody wanted to know the scoop on that.

But that didn't last very long. They didn't stick around long. I think winter kind of scared most of them off. And off they went. They were only here for maybe a couple of years; two-three years.

RT: How old were you when that happened?

IL: I was a teenager, probably sixteen or seventeen.

RT: So, you graduated from high school and went to Ridgewater College?

IL: Yes.

RT: What did you study?

IL: First I started learning to be a legal assistant.

RT: What was it called then?

IL: Back then, it was Willmar Vo-Tech. Vocational Technical School.

RT: And you did legal administration?

IL: Yes. I went there for two years. It was fun. Again, I went to school with most of the gals, not all of the gals from my class, but some of them. But again, there was no diversity whatsoever—none.

RT: Did it feel like an older version of high school for you?

IL: Yes, except it was more fun. You were an adult. Teachers were wonderful. The teachers were wondering where you are from and how long you have been here. That sort of stuff, but very respectful.

RT: So what was your first job when you were finished with college?

IL: Let me think. I actually went to work for the Chamber of Commerce.

RT: Really? What did you do there?

IL: And that used to be here, downtown, on Litchfield Avenue. I was a secretary. And I would take minutes and I would also be in charge of some committees. And you know, I thank the people that hired me back then, because I know now that some of the folks that would call in would say, "Why did you hire her?" But I had no idea of that. I had no idea this was going on behind me. I was just doing my job. And sure enough there were some people that were not happy.

RT: Why do you think they hired you?

IL: I was good. I mean, I had good grades. I came highly recommended from my professors. They needed somebody that could do the work. I think back then the woman who hired me, must have seen good skills in me. I don't think she hired me because I was a person of color, that's for sure. But I certainly wasn't aware at all of the discrimination until I heard from them that they had gotten some comments about hiring me.

RT: How much later did you hear these comments?

IL: It was like within a month.

RT: Really.

IL: Yes. So now really those folks took a chance. Now that I think about it I think. they really took a chance back then, but in fact so did I take a chance in working around that environment.

RT: Did they ever tell you what their response was to those folks who would call?

IL: Well, their response, as far as I know from the women that told me back then, was to say that "she is young and she is qualified to do to answer phones and give out information. She is wonderful. We can't just fire her because you are a business owner and you want us to fire her. There has to be more than that. She has to do something wrong. She is not doing anything wrong." So that kind of stuff. But that was good. And I went back to school after a break and to school to finish the second year.

RT: Oh, Okay.

IL: And then after that, I started my job with the Public Defender's office, and that was fun. Okay, so now we are back into the middle 1980s. And then we had a murder in town. Well, actually it was outside of Willmar. And it is a sad thing because I actually went to school with her. With the gal that was murdered.

RT: At high school, or Ridgewater?

IL: At Ridgewater, yes. It was the Navy recruiter that moved here from somewhere else, that murdered her; stabbed her to death.

RT: So that was the big news that was like the first big thing that happened while you were fresh on the job?

IL: And I hate to say that, but when I heard it was a Navy recruiter I was relieved, because by then we were starting to hear rumblings.

RT: Rumblings of what?

IL: About the growing Latino population and about what they are going to do the town and why are they here. They're overcrowding the jails, or something like that.

RT: And this happened during the mid-1980s?

IL: Mid-to-late 1980s.

RT: Where do you think these grumblings were coming from, and where did you hear about them?

IL: You would hear people talking, or you would read about it in the paper. At that time you began to see this or read the crimes in the newspaper. I can't say that they were horrific crimes. At that time they were DWI or disorderly conduct - that sort of thing. Maybe some stealing, small thefts. That kind of stuff. People having a hard time in the grocery stores. Telling people to speak English and not speak Spanish. That sort of thing.

RT: Prior to the things you would read in the paper, the records of things that happened in the town. Were the same sort of records being listed in the paper about the Anglo community as well?

IL: Oh yes. In fact I started my career with a murder case of a white man. And people forget those things – that things like that happened. So that's how we started to hear about it. Jennie-O was growing and the plant was adding on. They were bringing in workers from down south. There would be people talking about how Latinos come up here for Welfare, and how Jennie-O brings them up here for that. Of course, I worked for the public defender's office. From time to time I had to put up with some not very nice comments from attorneys about some of their clients of color especially. So that was kind of disturbing. But then later on, within a year or so, I was able to do some interpreting at the courthouse. Which I thought was quite a step for them to take to provide folks with the right of an interpreter. Before that they weren't doing it.

RT: Did you have formal training or did that come afterwards?

IL: I did. The gal that did it before did not have training. And back then anyone willing to do it would go to the hospital. I remember helping a family when I was fifteen. I needed to go interpret at the hospital because there was nobody else that could help them.

RT: What formal interpreting training did you get?

IL: Just the through the Minnesota Supreme Court. Being a legal assistant I knew a lot of the terminology. And I was checking with friends in the Twin Cities, mainly. Back then that was our biggest connection - checking with other interpreters. There was no certification program, nothing like that. And it just grew from there.

RT: So what do you think was the driving force that allowed people to get an interpreter, or use an interpreter here in Willmar at least?

IL: Well, I think one reason was that we had a good court administrator back then that realized that the rights of these people were being violated by not getting an interpreter. Why should they sit in jail or wherever on a misdemeanor charge or something like that. So that was wonderful. Also, I think, they didn't want to be sued by not providing somebody with the proper assistance.

RT: Do you still do interpretations?

IL: No, Not any more. Too busy.

RT: So while you were working at the public defender's office you were also fulfilling the role of interpreter for the court systems and the hospitals?

IL: Sometimes, sometimes. Not so much the hospitals, but mostly in the courts.

RT: How long did you do that?

IL: Oh, I can't remember. A good ten years. And it wasn't just there. After I left the public defender's office. I did some in Renville County, and in Chippewa County. But I would say most of it was in Willmar, Kandiyohi and Renville.

RT: Why did you leave the public defender's office?

IL: Back then, I went to work at Prairie Lakes Detention Center. It was a better job. A higher paying job.

RT: It was a better, higher paying job. How did you like that job?

IL: I loved it. It involved helping kids. You were dealing with criminal children, basically. It was fun to learn about mental health. And I wanted to help these kids have better lives.

RT: Do you think that the majority of the children that were there, the juveniles that were there, had mental health issues?

IL: Most of them did.

RT: Most of them did.

IL: Oh, yes. Or substance abuse issues. Some had both, some had triple issues. But it was interesting at the time. And then they hired a Latino guy to work there as well.

RT: So you remember what his name was?

IL: Raul. I can't think of his last name right now. There was another one, I thought his name was Joe Jimenez, or Ramirez. I don't know. I think Raul was Rodriguez. He had been with - Raul had worked with the State Hospital. Back then it was known as the Willmar Regional Treatment Center. Or was it the Willmar State Hospital. I have no idea. Anyway it was one of those names. So that's who Raul worked for part-time, and the other part-time job was working at Prairie Lakes Detention Center.

RT: What did you do at Prairie Lakes, what was your role?

IL: Oh gosh, what did they call me—Corrections Counselor? [Laughs] I think that was it.

RT: What did your job entail?

IL: Basically making sure that the kids were following through with their daily schedule. You get them up, they shower, get them fed. Making sure there was no fighting. It was like a correctional facility, except just not as bad.

RT: Where was the Prairie Lake Detention Center housed or where?

IL: It started out at the Treatment center.

RT: Oh, it did. It was part of the Treatment center.

IL: Yes, but by that time it wasn't part of the Treatment center. It was managed through the Department of Corrections. At that time, I should say, we didn't have any places to hold juveniles. Willmar was holding juveniles in other jails. They were spread around, all the way down to southern Minnesota or the Twin Cities. So they saw this as a good revenue thing to do. The county did, anyway, or the State. And so that's what drove them to open this place. By that time, this is when we started with the gangs. There were some Latino gangs in town.

RT: What year was that?

IL: Oh gosh, I think it was around 1988. Or before that. Around that time. And so they hired Raul and myself, and we would work opposite shifts so there was some coverage at all times.

RT: In terms of having some who was Spanish speaking?

IL: Right, in case we had some Latino kids that would come through the juvenile justice system and that would end up over there. So we would deal with that. But I can't really say that we had tons of Latino kids. We had our share, but I would say most of them were white, from all over the place. We'd get them from everywhere. But back then it was nice to have someone to speak the language, because we would get these kids from counties where there was virtually no Latino presence whatsoever, and no services. If you can imagine that back then.

RT: How long did you work there?

IL: Four years, or five years.

RT: Did you see a change in the juvenile detention population in terms of demographics?

IL: Sure. By the time I left, we started to see that it was gang time back then. It was when the gangs were growing - not just one gang, but gangs everywhere. All over the state of Minnesota, but specifically Willmar. The Latin Kings. We started to see quite a few Latino kids being put out there at the center. Some stuff was questionable, should they have been put out there or not, I don't know. Yes, we did start to see an increase in holding Latino youth.

RT: This is in the midst of that time when you became aware that people had started grumbling here in the Willmar area?

IL: Yes. That was in the midst of all the changes that were happening, and there was really nobody who was prepared for it. People were angry at each other. And also, by that time, or right before that, I suppose in 1988, 1989, we had the lawsuit against the Willmar School District.

RT: Okay. Could you refresh our memory as to what that was about?

IL: Yes. It really had to do with some Latino families who felt that their kids were being put in ESL [English as a Second Language] classes just based on whether or not they had a Latino last name. Nothing more than that. Not so much based on actual testing of the kids to see if they knew the English language, or testing to see how much they knew academically. So, there were about ten to twenty families that decided to sue the Willmar School District. And I helped with that, along with Janice Vasquez.

RT: What was your role in that?

IL: Actually, my role didn't come in until quite a bit later, until the settlement happened. There was no money, but the settlement stated that things needed to be done differently. It said that the Willmar School District did not have a good process of identifying kids and whether they were actually in need of ESL programming or not. So then, I can't remember the agency that got involved, but it has got to do with the Civil Rights out of Chicago. And then they came they said, "you don't really have a plan. You are just doing it based on their last names or what they look like. You really need to have a plan in place." And so then things changed for the Willmar School District. They had to deal with it, and nobody was happy about it, obviously. Because it meant change. It means you have to do things differently. But once things were implemented as far as having the Latino parent committee, having people get involved and actually coming up with the process, then people really felt that it was fair. That it wasn't so bad. That good things came out of that.

RT: So were you working on behalf of the Willmar Public Schools?

IL: Back then, yes.

RT: Or where you working on behalf of the parents?

IL: It was really both. I think I was really that liaison again. I wasn't really with the school. School personnel didn't see me as one of them. And the Latino people saw me as being more with them, but yet with the system.

RT: Who were you employed by?

IL: Back then?

RT: Yes.

IL: Back then, I was actually employed by an agency called Greater Minnesota Family Services.

RT: Your organization, the organization you were working with, was involved with the implementing the changes?

IL: Yes, implementing the changes that were in the settlement agreement.

RT: Okay

IL: And out of that has come some wonderful changes. Now when a family comes in. They register, there is somebody there right away that speaks their language whether it is Somali or Spanish. You explain everything to them and then they are tested. The kids are tested...if the parent agrees to it. They are not tested if the parent doesn't agree to it. And services are offered at that time.

RT: Okay.

IL: Before that it was never clear. So now we have a system that actually works. Back then, things change, you never know. You never know that you were doing things the wrong way.

RT: What was another big factor that you can recall?

IL: Well, the Elm Lane trailer park. That is when the gangs - that's when the gang thing was going on. Elm Lane was a mess. It was affordable housing for many Latino people. I think what people didn't realize is that because there was so much discrimination in housing there was often nowhere else for people to go. That was where folks ended up whether they were good or bad.

I remember having a family out there, not just one, but maybe two or three that I needed to work with. And I myself would not go over there after six o'clock in the evening.. Especially in the winter time when it was dark out - no way. I mean it was a dangerous place. You had all kinds of people out there. You had gang members as well as wonderful people, caring people. But because of the lack of housing, that is where they had to live. And anyway, the landlord would take advantage of these folks and just charge rent and not take care of the trailer houses. They were not owners as far as I know. Some could have been. But they were not. They were basically renting. Some of them did not have working sewers so that was disgusting. I remember when they just finally decided, the city just finally decided we can't take this anymore we've got to shut it down. It is too dangerous. Um, the houses, the trailer houses are inhabitable. You can't live in them. And um, believe it or not.

RT: Was it a local landlord?

IL: At that time it was, yes. So they sued him.

RT: They being the city of Willmar?

IL: Not so much the city. Actually I don't know if at that time the city sued them or not. But I know there were some families that sued the landlord. There was an attorney who helped the families and again, I don't know that they got any money or anything like that. It wasn't about that so much as really letting people know that people have rights and you have to respect that. The good thing that came out of that was that some of those folks were able to move out into the community into housing. And some of those folks are still here and are homeowners.

RT: So, how long did Elm Lane incident last?

IL: I would say a good year, or two years.

RT: And that being from the time of the suit to being resolved? I mean Elm Lane didn't just happen over night

IL: Oh no. There was an Elm Lane way before any Latinos came. But as Jennie-O grew and brought in more people, the only housing available was trailer houses. All the trailer parks were growing. But that was the one where most Latinos lived. In part it was because, you know, you want to be around people like you. You want to be in a neighborhood that is welcoming to you. And that time it was Elm Lane.

RT: So what happened with the trailer park?

IL: They destroyed it. I mean, whoever could move out moved out. Whatever was left was destroyed. And people, some people moved out, and like I said, some people are homeowners now.

RT: What happened to the park itself?

IL: It is land.

RT: It is just land, it's a vacant lot right now?

IL: It is a vacant lot right now.

RT: And it's owned by the City of Willmar?

IL: You know, I have no idea. I think so. I don't know who owns it. It is right over there across from the Holiday Inn.

RT: So, did you have like people that you worked with that lived in Elm Lane while this was happening?

IL: Yes.

RT: How did they express themselves to you?

IL: They were very worried. Where were they going to go? How could they afford anything? But at the same time, behind the scenes, some agencies, especially back then the Heartland Community Action was working towards finding some homes that had been rehabbed. They worked to have some of those folks move into some of those homes. They were be affordable. And, they could continue to live here. When the trailer park was destroyed, I am sure some people said, "oh good they are all going to go away." Well, that's not going to happen, and that didn't happen. So that's a good thing.

RT: At what point did you and your husband get married?

IL: Back then, I got married way to soon, back in 1983. That was a long time ago by then.

RT: It has been over twenty years now?

IL: Yes. We've been married almost twenty-seven years.

RT: Really?

IL: Yes.

RT: How was your husband welcomed into the large Latino family?

IL: Well, for us it was no big deal. It was wonderful. And with his family for the most part they have been open to it. Not always, and obviously it was different. But for us it was no big deal.

RT: When you say for us, you mean your side of the family?

IL: My family. Yes, my family. My mom was great and he was great. He learned to like the food. I can't say that he was crazy about it. You know, because he had heard some stereotypes about Latinos eating dogs and things like that. Making tacos out of them. (laughing)

I know I nearly forgot, when was it—1970-something? Maybe it was 1980. You will have to check that out. That is when Taco John's, the first Taco John's restaurant opened up in Willmar, Minnesota. Tacos—I couldn't believe it. I know it was a big deal. Nobody could believe it. Tacos? Yeah! There was quite a line when the first Taco John's opened up.

RT: Where was it?

IL: On Litchfield Avenue.

RT: On Litchfield Avenue?

IL: Yes, the old one.

RT: On Hwy 12 and Litchfield Avenue?

IL: Yes, that one. I remember that. And people just trying it out. And some people saying, "You've never had a taco, you got to try a taco!" [Laughter]

RT: So that was the first ethnic food in Willmar?

IL: The first ever. Yes for a long time. [Laugh]

RT: Was Taco John's?

IL: Yes. And of course, for the Latino folks who would go there, it was like, ugh, this is disgusting. But the Anglo people, they liked it. They were like, oh yes, yes this is good. That was interesting, very interesting. It was like finally getting a taste of culture. It was sad in a way, you know? We are so sheltered. Yes, I remember all of those days.

RT: So you have how many kids?

IL: Two.

RT: Two kids, a boy and a girl?

IL: Yes.

RT: Or a girl and a boy?

IL: The girl first, and then our son second. So she lived here through a time when again there were very few kids in school that were minority kids. There were maybe two, here and there in some of the classes. And in her class there was maybe one. Which was interesting, that would have been back in 1986 or so.

RT: Is that when she was born?

IL: 1987, 1988, something like that.

RT: So would she feel, to your knowledge was there any big difference between your daughter and the kids, her classmates?

IL: No, not with her.

RT: Not with her?

IL: No, she was, you know, she would fit in because she was lighter in color.

RT: And she had a different last name that you did?

IL: Yes, the name was different. And you couldn't pick her out. Nobody knew she was my daughter back then, you know.

RT: How many years difference is there between your son and your daughter?

IL: Eleven.

RT: Eleven years?

IL: So there is quite a difference.

RT: So is there a big difference with him and your daughter?

IL: Yes.

RT: Why?

IL: Because by then you were seeing Somali kids in the classroom. And it is just so cool, so neat. We started experiencing some kids, some Somali kids starting to come to Willmar.

RT: When did your son enter school?

IL: Oh, Ruth, it is hard to remember. About fourteen years ago. So when would that have been? 1999, 2000? I don't know, somewhere around there. He was born in 1994. So it would have been around 1999 or 2000.

RT: So when his kindergarten, first grade, preschool class?

IL: Oh gosh, in kindergarten did he have any Somali classmates? I don't think he did. In first grade, maybe. I don't think so. I met my first Somali around that time. And I think she was the first one at the Willmar Junior High. She was our very first Somali gal. I think her name was Uhmi? I don't know if anybody remembers that. I don't know if that rings a bell to you or not. But Uhmi was wonderful. She, too, come here about Junior High age and stayed here for many years and then moved on St. Cloud to go to school.

RT: Did you feel like you identified with her because she came as a junior higher and you kind of move to the area as a junior higher?

IL: I think yea, and I think some of the teachers just wanted her to feel welcome and feel protected. You know, she was different and because she was only one, she was being bombarded with a lot of caring people. Yes, it wasn't the same as when everyone started coming. [Laugh] You can always handle one, but when many come then it's a different story.

RT: So were you working with the school district when...?

IL: Where was I back then? Yes, what did I do? Well, I started with this, the West Central Integration Collaborative, in 2002 with the Willmar District. And before that, in 2000, I was with Greater Minnesota Family Services doing this kind of work.

RT: Now refresh my memory. Did you ever work for PACT 4 Families?

IL: Yes, that too.

RT: How long did you do that?

IL: I don't know.

RT: What was that role?

IL: Back then we got a grant through the Federal Government, and basically what they wanted to do has to do with mental health and kids.

RT: Which was a good transition for you, coming from what you had been doing?

IL: Yes, it was.

RT: It was a good transition for you coming from Prairie Lakes to Pact 4 Families?

IL: Right, and so we got a huge grant. It was like a five or six million dollar grant to work with families. To reduce out of home placement for kids with mental health issues. And back then, it was to try to help Pact 4 Families to become more culturally competent. You know, nationwide there was a trend where they started to see the kids of color being placed in detention centers, out of home placement and so forth at a much higher rate than their Anglo counterparts.

Back then, our call was to make sure that the counties that Pact 4 worked with were aware of some cultural things that could be in place. They needed to make sure that services were being offered in a culturally competent manner. So, do you have interpreters, do you have bilingual workers, do you have written materials, videos, do you have this and do you have that? They needed to be sure they had all these things when working with Latino families.

RT: So how long were you there for that, with that particular organization?

IL: Three or four years.

RT: Three or four years?

IL: Yes, until the school recruited me then for this job, with the Integration Collaborative.

RT: And that is called the West Central Integration Collaborative?

IL: Yes. And at that time, we started with three school districts only.

RT: And that was?

IL: Willmar, ACGC and NLS. And at that time it was really focused on school activities. You know, bringing about some cultural changes. Making sure that kids of color could have some activities also that they could relate to. I know back then, it was the soccer program that began. There was talk about a soccer program, and then we started the program because with the monies available we were able to support a soccer program that would be there with scholarship dollars for some of the kids who couldn't afford it. And things just grew from there.

RT: So, now the focus continues to remain the same or has the mission changed?

IL: Well, now we are, the focus is much broader. It is more inclusive of not just the school system but also the community. Because if the community is not there to support you, you will not survive. Then there is Economic Development with the WAMM, the

Willmar Area Multicultural Market. And just promoting economic development for Latino—and not just Latino, but also for Somali and other minority entrepreneurship.

RT: So what is your role there at West Central or the Collaborative?

IL: Right now, I run the Collaborative. I am the director. I oversee the budgets, and all kinds of committees. Grant writing. I write, write, and write in front of the computer. But also making sure the community understands that we are a vital part of this community and that we need to be supportive of each other. And when new people come to town, we need to face that straight ahead and let them know that they do not need to fear anything. We are all the same to a certain extent. And that change is here. Change has been here for awhile. It is not bad thing. It is okay.

RT: So if you could compare Willmar as it is today versus as it was when you got here, what are some differences that you see?

IL: Well, I see more diversity, and not just in people of color and different cultures. We have always had different Northern European cultures. People like to think that we are all just one happy Norwegian family, but we are not. There are not just Norwegians, but people from Germany or Sweden and all those folks. But I think it is more fun now. I think that when you study cultures, and you know this, we bring some different values and some different traditions. And I like that. I think immigrants, when they come to this country, bring such wonderful values that a lot of generations have forgotten. I mean kids don't know what to do with an iron. Kids don't know how to make anything homemade. [Laughs] Kids think they are entitled to everything. You know, they have no idea that you are suppose to work for what you own or for your money, or this or that.

The Latinos can be loud and we like music. We love a party, where our Norwegian folks and our Northern European folks don't. They're like, we like it quiet, we like order, right? Those types of things. I have noticed that difference. Now, if you want to go to a wedding, you can. If you want to go to a quinceañera, and you have been invited, that's wonderful. If you want to have a taco at the mall, you can. Or you can eat at the Somali restaurant. Oh my gosh, I always tell people what they are missing out on. Oh, that food is wonderful. But not just the food, but the way they dress, they way they carry themselves. The women are just wonderful, and so are the men. No, it has changed a lot. I mean you go to Cash Wise, or you go to Wal-Mart, and you can find anything. You can find products from Mexico, like tamales. What a difference! What a difference!

RT: So no more having to make do?

IL: Going to Chicago to buy all your stuff for one single season of tamales. (laughs) Isn't that something? That is something. I can't believe it. Thank goodness for my mother who kept doing that.

RT: Are there some traditions that you are really glad you are able to pass on to your daughter and your son? Are there some traditions you would have liked to instill in them, but you just weren't able to?

IL: Well, I feel bad for our daughter we weren't able to have a quinceañera. I mean at that time, it wasn't that we weren't able to, it was just that we felt, "who is going to get it? The people here are not going to know what the party is about." And we should have done it anyway. She had wonderful friends. I think that is one we wish we would have done. And you don't have to go all out. You can just enjoy sharing that with other folks.

It is certainly fun to see other families now do that. So that is one thing. The other one is some of the foods. You now, I don't make tamales, I buy them. But just so you know, we do have cooking classes with my older sister. She invites us over to learn. So we are learning, because we do want to pass that on, because I do think that something that simple that brings so much happiness is worth learning and passing on. And then there is showing the respect for your elders. I just don't see that sometimes with Anglo kids – respect for their grandparents and things like that. Where our kids are brought up to do that.

RT: Do you think that is a cultural thing or do you think is more of a generational thing?

IL: Well, I guess it could be a generational thing. But I am surprised as to how strong that is in the Latino community. And how kids are so grateful or so thankful for their grandparents and are willing to do anything for them.

RT: You don't really see that in the Anglo community?

IL: Oh, I do, I do. But not to that extent. No, I think we have gotten to the point now where it is more about money. It's like if I am good to my grandparents, I am going to get their money. Where we don't think that way. We just do it because we really want to do it. Money has nothing to do with it. Well, it could be. It could just be generational. But how do we teach our kids to go back to some of those things? That's why I think immigrants are good for communities. That hard work ethic and those values are important to see, especially in these times—in tough economic times.

RT: What are some, what were the major values that your parents instilled in you, do you think?

IL: They are pretty much the same as everybody else, except that we take ours a little more seriously. Respect for others, value yourself, and value your culture. Don't forget where you came from. But I think a lot of folks would say the same about their parents, and that that's what they were taught. Education is important if anything is important. Education, hard work, and those types of things. Through hard work you will get what you reap, I guess, what you sew. And not using excuses. I mean, there were never any excuses, like saying that just because you were brown you can't get ahead, or just

because you are this you can't get ahead. No. You know you can get ahead, you can use whatever you have, whatever skills you have got.

RT: So now that your daughter is out of the house and she is married, does she have a family of her own?

IL: Yes.

RT: Is she starting a family of her own?

IL: Oh yes. She has a little girl who is six and half. A husband who is Anglo. I don't know his exact background as far as the cultural thing. [Laughs] She went to school and she is BSN. She got her Bachelor in Science in Nursing. So she is an RN [Registered Nurse] at the hospital.

RT: What are some values that your daughter is teaching her kids, her children that have kind of come from your parents?

IL: I would say family. You know, always family first and everything else second. She really likes that. I think when we go and visit my side of the family down in San Antonio, she always feels wonderful about it. Not that she doesn't like her dad's, because she does. But we are warmer, we are louder, we have more fun. That kind of thing.

The other values are: go to school, learn something, do something with your life, don't take it for granted. If you want to pass on some traditions, great, let's do that, and you should. And she has. The other one is the language. She speaks Spanish. She studied it. And she uses it if she has to at the hospital to help other folks. She has worked with minority populations. She spent a couple of months down in South Africa and worked in the villages. And she did some wonderful work over there with pregnant women. Delivered children, so I think we have taught her that people are people, and you need to value everyone as human beings.

RT: What would you like to see Willmar become? What would your ideal Willmar look like in the future?

IL: In the future, oh boy! I don't think it can, but we can try. [Laughs] I think it would be nice to come to our senses and be present in 2009. It is 2009. I love history. I love it, love it, love it. Don't get me wrong, but I think we need to be living life as it is today, not in the past. I like diversity. I think Willmar is starting to look somewhat like the rest of the world, or like the Twin Cities. Although, obviously, we don't have the population, the large population the Twin Cities has. But that is what I would like to see, to keep the diversity alive, and to keep it growing. I mean, I go to other towns, smaller towns, bigger towns, and it is just so nice to come back here and see the difference. Those other towns are still back where I was in 1975. There are towns still like that. I want to tell them, "It is 2009—get with it." So I think we are moving forward. But that's what I would like to see

in Willmar. Willmar should be—well, it would be nice if it could look like Paris, too, but that’s not going to happen. [Laughs] I like the diversity.

I haven’t talked about my trip to China. I went to China in 2006. That was quite a trip, and it was arranged through the school. We applied for a federal grant to start the Chinese program so that Mandarin Chinese could be taught at the high school. And we were awarded that, and then the Chinese government invited us to go over there, in hopes that we would have a cultural exchange of students or staff. Now we are getting a Chinese teacher to come here to Willmar. But one of the things when I was in Beijing, and we were driving around, they were driving us all over the place. One of the things that everybody missed, all the folks in our group—and there were about a thousand to two thousand educators from the U.S.—was the lack of diversity. If you wanted to have Mexican food one night, you couldn’t. If you wanted to have spaghetti one night, guess what, you can’t.

RT: You could have noodles, but not spaghetti.

IL: That’s right. If you wanted to see black people, they don’t exist in China. There are brown people, you know, some Chinese. Obviously, there is some diversity within China, don’t get me wrong. There are different groups, and yes, some people look different than others, but it is not the diversity that we have here. Everybody missed that, they were saying, “wow, this is what it looks like to be one kind of people.”

It was fun when we were there; it was great. But, boy, it was nice to come back to the United States and see the changes. To see just how different things are here. We can pick anything we want. For food, for ambiance, or just to go anywhere. And they can’t in China, and that’s what I experienced for ten to twelve days, and it was sad. Everyone was hungry for something different than scorpion, fish, shark, donkey, whatever other weird stuff we had. We had all kinds of weird food. But it was fun, too. It was China and it was great.

I think one of the things that speaks loudly of a good community is that you do have some diversity. It shows, I don’t like the word tolerance, but it shows that you are able to move beyond the differences. And that you are trying to work with each other. Not that we love each other dearly, we don’t. But we do enjoy it sometimes, and we learn to like things that come from other cultures and other ways of doing things. It’s okay. Well, over there in China there was one culture, one way to be, one food, that was it. There was a McDonalds, Subway and KFC, but to get to that was impossible.

RT: Any last thoughts or comments you would like share with Minnesotans of the future?

IL: Minnesotans of the future. You know, I think of it sometimes. And sometimes I even dream of it, and how we are making such a big deal about all this difference and then when our kids grow up, it is not a big deal. This is what the world will look like. And I

just think, wow, and we sweated all that time we were fighting and arguing with each other. And now we are all together and things will be good.

I don't think that things will be one hundred percent perfect. But I think we should strive for that; it doesn't hurt. We can't deny the hardships or anything like that, because there were many of them. There were many in this town. But then again, there were some wonderful things that we need to focus on, and I prefer to focus on the positive. It is too darn draining to focus only on the negative. It really is. So I want, as much as I want my kids to want my life, my culture, it is impossible. It is even impossible for me. I mean think about it, I didn't grow up among my people. Much of my life has been spent among Northern European folks, but I want my kids to just be happy and be appreciative of others. For the community I want the same thing. We need to grow. That's what it will take for all of us to get along—understanding.

RT: Thank you for your time.

IL: Thank you.

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