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Interview with Alejandro Gomez

Conducted at the contact's home in Mt. Vernon at 8 p.m. on October 28

Interviewers: Darleen Feldman and Abby Kennedy

AK: This is an interview with Alejandro Gomez in Mt Vernon on October 28 1998. I'm Abby Kennedy this is Darleen Feldman

DF: Hi.

AG: I'm Alejandro Gomez.

AK: We're going to leave the mic right there. You don't have to talk into it. Okay. Can you start by telling us about your background?

AG: My background... okay... I'm a chemical engineer. I graduated from a university in Venezuela. (*some confusion about the proximity of the mic*) This is my first job since I graduated so I don't have too much professional background. But... what else do you want to know?

AK: Actually, we're more interested in your personal background, like where you grew up, why you came to Mt Vernon, that kind of thing.

AG: Okay. I grew up in Venezuela-- Caracas, that's the capital city of Venezuela-- and when I joined Cooper I knew that I was going to come here to do 1 year training for Cooper. And that I'm going to be to sales manager from Latin America, and that's what I'm doing here.

AK: How did you learn English?

AG: Well, actually, I don't know. I mean, I'm still learning. I need to learn a lot more. But I took courses in Venezuela for 6 months and then I came here. When I came here I could not speak any English because I know some grammar but I couldn't speak and I couldn't understand people because, you know, I knew the grammar but it's not the same way people talk. So. Well I started to talk with the people and that's the way I have learned something.

DF: And when did you come to the United States?

AG: I came here in March 5, this year.

AK: Which makes it 8 months, about?

AG: 8 months. Yeah. Well the most difficult thing when I came here was trying to talk by phone. I couldn't... I mean, it was really hard for me to try to listen to people by phone and try to talk by phone. But now I can, and that's something that's really good.

DF: Did you find when you first got here that the language barrier was a problem, or were people helpful?

AG: Well, everyone was really helpful. Everybody was trying to help, but it wasn't easy because I couldn't speak English and they couldn't speak Spanish, of course. I didn't know anyone who speak Spanish. So... it was really hard when I came here but now I know a lot of people who speak Spanish and I can speak English, so it's getting better every day.

AK: How did you meet other people who spoke Spanish?

AG: Well at work there was a guy who spoke Spanish and was from Venezuela, too. He's here with his family. So, people at work told me about this guy, and the other guys--I don't know, I just met them, you know, in the street, I don't know exactly how, I just... If you see somebody who's from Latin America, you can recognize them. You know... you can't tell with everybody, but you can tell a little bit and you can try to speak in Spanish. So that's the way.

DF: What was your first impression of Mt Vernon?

AG: Well, my first impression was that it was no buildings, no mountains, that everything was clean. Well, I wasn't seen any snow before I came here and when I came there was some snow and it was so white and cold, but I like it. My first impression was like "nice town, nice little town."

(Long pause)

AK: What do you think about the interaction between the Spanish-speaking community and the rest of Knox County?

AG: Hmm. Well, I can just talk from my experience. I don't know about the rest of the people but for me I think that people here in Knox County are really friendly. I can go everywhere by myself and meet a lot of people, make a lot of friends, everyday. I think that here people are really, really friendly and I like that.

AK: So you didn't... did you think people were more friendly here as compared to Venezuela?

AG: Well of course I have lot of friends down there in Venezuela, all of my friends, but here people is more friendly. Of course, yeah, here you can make friends easier than down there. Maybe because down there I used to live in a big city and in big cities you cannot make friends easier, but you know it's just really easy to make friends here. You only have to talk and they say "Wow, where are you from?" and you say "I'm from Venezuela" and then you make friends like that. Everyday.

AK: Do you think there's a Hispanic...

AG: What?

AK: Do you think there's a Spanish-speaking community in Knox County?

AG: Hmm. Interesting question. Here in Mt. Vernon, I know that there are some people who don't speak English, they just speak Spanish. And they are like a community. Yes of course. I don't know... I just met them. I mean, I don't know a lot about them. When I came here nobody told me about people who spoke Spanish. I didn't know, I just met them about 1 month ago so it means that not everybody knows about them; otherwise they would tell me.

AK: You've kind of covered this, but... have you experienced any kind of prejudice since you came here?

AG: Actually... no. No. I haven't felt like everybody has something against me. I just find them all really friendly.

DF: What about keeping some of the cultural parts of your life in Venezuela... has that been hard here? Have you found foods that you can't prepare here, or--

AG: Yes. Yes, I mean of course you cannot find everything. I mean, the kinds of food you can find in Venezuela you cannot find here, but you can find in Venezuela all the food you can find here because in Venezuela we have a lot of influence from North America, so... in Venezuela we eat hamburgers, hot dogs, all that kind of thing but there are also a lot of typical foods from Venezuela that you cannot find here. And, yes I miss my food sometimes, but its not really bad.

DF: What about differences in holidays, and other different cultural things between Venezuela and the United States?

AG: Well, holidays are different. And you know, some holidays here, I don't know what they're about or why. We don't have Thanksgiving; we have another different holiday. It's interesting; it's different culture, and I'm happy to learn about this culture.

AK: You speak really good English. (!) What's your take on... for instance, Fernando¹; people who came from form Latin America or Mexico but speak very little English. Do you think ...
(drifts off)

AG: I think the reason for that is... I mean probably Fernando and everybody wants to learn English because it's an international language and everybody should know it. But sometimes... [Fernando] has a lot of friends who speak Spanish, he maybe doesn't need to learn English, and if you need to learn English that's the best way you can learn. But I'm sure that he wants to learn English, and he should. He should.

AK: Yeah, I think you're probably right about that. Because he seems pretty self-conscious about not being able to speak any English.

¹Another of our informants, and an acquaintance of Alejandro's.

AG: Yeah, it's really bad sometimes. I mean, you need to speak English. You're living here, in the States; you need to speak English.

DF: What about... how old are you?

AG: 25.

DF: What about being a 25 year old in Knox County? What's that like socially? It must be definitely different than Venezuela.

AG: Well, I found that here there is almost no young people, compared to Venezuela. In Venezuela everybody is young. Everybody's 20 or 25, or between 15 and 30 years old. Here, you can see a lot of old people and not as many young people. So for a 25 year old single man like me, it's hard. You need more friends, more young people, and more things to do. More people to interact [with].

AK: Do you feel like you've started to find that in Knox County?

AG: Yes, I mean I'm sure that maybe there are a lot of young people, college students... maybe I have been to the wrong places, because I haven't found too much. But yes, now I am starting to find lots of young people. That's right.

DF: This is off the subject a bit... you said that since you've been here you've felt very accepted by Knox County. Do you feel like Knox County in general, is very accepting of all groups? What have you seen; are they accepting of the elderly, or Asians, or blacks; what have you seen working at Cooper?

AG: Well, I haven't seen too much black people. I wonder why. I don't know the reason. I don't know exactly. I can just tell by my experience that people here is friendly, but maybe sometimes it's just that they are friendly, but it's just... superficial relations. But, yeah, I think people here are friendly most of the time, maybe young people seem like (*unintelligible*) but they are friendly.

AK: You were telling us over dinner that you feel like the racial situation is different here than it is in Venezuela?

AG: The racial situation, yes.

AK: Could you expand on that?

AG: I think that here there is more contrast, I mean you can see black people in some towns and neighborhoods and white people in another neighborhood, and over there it's different. Black people and white people are mixed, everywhere, so you don't see a black-people neighborhood and a white-people neighborhood... So, I think that here there is more racial discrimination.

AK: Did you find that difficult to get used to? Just in general, the way that America kind of categorizes people?

AG: Well, I don't like that, but I don't think it's difficult to get used to. If you're not really involved, if you don't have to work with black people, then you don't feel the real problem. Here in Mt. Vernon there is no black people, so you don't really feel the problem, but maybe in a city like Columbus or something you can feel the problem more because you have to see [both races] but here, it's not a big deal.

AK: What about at Cooper? Is there a lot of racial or cultural diversity there?

AG: Well, I don't think so but... hmm. I haven't seen black people working for Cooper here in Mt. Vernon. At least not in the offices; maybe in the factories.

AK: Are they separate?

AG: No, not separate. It's just that I haven't seen them. I mean, maybe... I don't think it's because Cooper has a racial politic or something, I think it's just because here in Mt. Vernon, there are no black people.

DF: How long are you living here? For a year?

AG: Yes, a year.

DF: And, well you've been able to travel to some of the bigger cities but do you feel like living in Mt. Vernon for a year gives you a good picture of what life is like in the United States?

AG: Well, I think that here in the United States you can find everything, so one place is not going to tel you how life is in the United States, you have to travel around, so, here in Mount Vernon I think that you can see how it is in a typical town in the United States, I'm not sure, but of course you need to go to a lot of cities, big cities to see how people live in big cities.

AK: So you think Mount Vernon is typical of small towns in America?

AG: I think so. I don't know, but I think so, yeah. What do you think?

(AK and DF converse about this, decide yes, it's pretty typical, and prides itself on this.)

AK: What do you see--you might not have thought about this, I can't say I have--but what do you see as the future of Knox County and Mount Vernon especially?

AG: Well, I think that Knox County is growing, I think so, because here there is a lot of land and lot of places to build things, factories and everything, so I think it's growing and probably more people are going to come here to stay because... land is cheaper and everything and there are a lot of possibilities for people to come here. And I think that it's going to make Knox County grow.

AK: Do you think people's attitudes will change as it grows? How do you think the people themselves will change as it gets more urbanized?

AG: Yes, sure. Yes, I'm sure. If the town is growing and everything is growing, sure people are going to change and it's going to be like... another city. Sure.

AK: You were saying that maybe things were more ethnically or racially... separated in cities. And I was wondering if you can see that happening in Mount Vernon as it gets bigger and bigger.

AG: I mean, something like what?

AK: Well, you were saying about Columbus that things are more-- you know, black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods-- like, a lot more divided-

AG: Well, I think that's going to happen here too, if it grows real fast and becomes a big city, it'll happen here too. You know, in all the US cities you can see black and white neighborhoods, I mean, New York city and Chicago, everywhere, so why not here? So probably it'll be the same way but, hopefully not, I don't like that. You never know.

DF: I don't know much about Cooper's, but I wondered... if you've seen that Cooper's has a large influence on the community here?

AG: Yes. I think so, because Cooper is one of the biggest companies here in town and a lot of people work at Cooper. If Cooper's doing well in business then the town is good, and if not, the town is not good. I think so, yeah. Every time I go to some place and say I work for Cooper, people tell me "Oh I heard that Cooper's not doing well in business, what is happening?" Everybody interested to know what is going on with Cooper. And I think that Cooper can influence the life of the town.

(DF and AK converse about more questions, say that they're finished.)

AG: Is that all?

AK: Well, do you have any questions you want to ask us? Fire them back.

AG: Well, what do you think about Knox County? What do you think about life here, the racial discrimination, the Spanish community?

DF: As far as the Spanish community goes, they've been very inviting to Abby and I, we've been having a good time with them. As far as Knox County, I thought there would be more racial prejudice than there is, or than people have been saying they felt... just because I've noticed that when I go to the grocery store or to Wal-Mart or a place like that, I haven't seen any of the Asian-Americans that live here going to those stores, I haven't seen any of the blacks going to those stores... these seem to be in hiding... or just not visible, and I thought maybe that was

because of the community, but as far as the guys who work at Fiesta Mexicana, they say it's because they work seven days a week, and it's not because of the community. That's my take.

AK: My take is pretty much the same thing, because... well, when I came to Kenyon I heard all these stories about... do you know what the KKK is?

AG: No.

AK: It's the Ku Klux Klan, it's this-

AG: Ah, yeah.

AK: Well, there were all these stories that Mount Vernon was this big KKK town, and one rumor that every house with a candle in the window was a KKK house... and I *believed* it, that was the thing. So I was like, oh my god what a terrible town, but the more I get to know people, the more I find that there's really a lot of tolerance but it's not pushy tolerance, you know what I mean? Everyone coexists and gets along but no one makes a big issue out of their being different. People don't seem very aggressive about their ethnic backgrounds.

AG: Yeah, well I have heard about people called "rednecks". I have heard histories about them... I think they are violent people. I don't know exactly, I haven't seen any redneck people.

AK: Where have you heard the stories?

AG: Well, you know in the bars people talk to me about it. I always say, it's really safe. You can leave your door open and nobody's going to steal anything from your house or you can leave your car open and you don't have to worry... and then people tell me about the rednecks. I'm not sure what exactly it means.

AK: Do you think if you weren't... you're going back in, what is it, four months?

AG: Yes, four months.

AK: Would you ever consider living here?

AG: Here in Mount Vernon or here in the States.

AK: Well, both.

AG: Yeah, sure, I'm considering to live in the States but maybe not here in Mount Vernon but maybe I can live here when I have family and kids and everything, but since I'm 25 now, I need to find a more interesting place to live. I need more things to do and more young people, more museums, theaters and everything, like there is in a city. But, yeah, I would like to live here when I'm married with a family and kids, because it seems like a nice safe place to live.

AK: Can you think of anything Mount Vernon has that Venezuela doesn't have?

AG: Well, the most important thing is the safety. I mean, that's really nice, because in Venezuela you always have to watch you're back... there are a lot of crimes and everything like that. So here it's just amazing, you can leave your door open, and besides that... (*long pause*) Besides that, people are just the same kind of people.

AK: Do you think small town in Venezuela have the same kind of safety that Mount Vernon does.

AG: (*quickly*) No. I don't think so. Nowhere.

(*Tape ends.*)

AG: Well, I was saying that, in Venezuela--I mean you cannot find a place there that has the same safety feeling you can have here. For sure.

DF: This is off the topic again, but.. You were talking about rednecks, and bars, and you were saying that you haven't seen much racial discrimination, but do you see discrimination based on people's economic status.

AG: Here in Knox County? No, I don't think so. I haven't seen that. I have seen people with a lot of money just going out and dancing with poor people and I think we have that kind of discrimination in Venezuela, and here I don't see that. In Venezuela, if you're a professional for sure you're not going to go out with someone who works for a grocery store, for sure, you don't do that. I mean, I don't know if it's economic discrimination or if you work for a grocery store, you can't afford to go out or do anything, maybe... but there is another kind of discrimination, that is, if you come from the capital city, Caracas, that's where I'm from and you go to a little town, everyone's going to hate you because you are from the big city.

DF: Why is that?

AG: Well, I don't know. People just hate us. Everywhere, because since it's a big city, people behave worse or something. If you're in little town, maybe the people there think you consider them less. I don't know why exactly. But I'm sure it has a reason.

AK: Do you think that... small-town distrust of the big-city people in Mount Vernon? Do you think that can happen here too?

AG: Distrust?

AK: Well, do you think that when people from Columbus come in, the people from Mount Vernon dislike them immediately?

AG: Yeah, well maybe it happens here. I don't know. It's just that the way you dress and talk and do things is different in the towns, and people don't like that in the towns. I don't know.

AK: Okay, well, thank you so much.

DF: Yeah, thanks.

AK: We are... off.

End of Interview