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KENYON COLLEGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Stories of Knox County

Odalys Fajardo
Interviewed by
Maria Brescia-Weiler and Sarah Aguilar
On
March 25, 2017

Kenyon College

Oral History Project
Stories of Knox County

Interviewee: Odalys Fajardo
Interviewer: Maria Brescia-Weiler and Sarah Aguilar
March 25, 2017

Sarah Aguilar: This is Sarah Aguilar and Maria Brescia Weiler with the Stories of Knox County Project interviewing Odalys Fajardo on her experiences in life in Knox County. Today's date is March 25th 2017 and we are speaking at the Wright Center. Thank you for your willingness to participate. Can you please say your full name and birthdate?

Odalys Fajardo: I am Odalys Fajardo born on September 27th, 1999.

SA: We are just going to start with, can you tell us how long you have lived here in Knox County?

OF: In Mount Vernon for, this is my eighth year in Ohio, hmm, ten years I think.

SA: How long has your family been here, or what brought your family here?

OF: They were originally from Chicago Illinois but my mom was, but they met up there and I was born there. So then when I was about two or three, I think three, we ended up moving to Columbus Ohio for job opportunities.

SA: And what were those, do you know?

OF: He works in carpentry and so over here there's more of a business for that than over there.

SA: So throughout your childhood, can you talk about some family values that were instilled in you that you still have today?

OF: Religion would be one of them (laughter) Also just caring for each other and putting family first above anything else.

Maria Brescia-Weiler: Can you just talk a little bit more about the role of religion?

OF: I grew up Catholic so like certain things... like how would I describe it? Being influenced with the cross on the wall or a picture of the last supper in the kitchen and then praying before bed thing.

SA: What are some things about Mount Vernon High School that you like and some things that you wish you could change?

OF: Some things I would change is there are some issues with preparing us for the future. And we are being thrown into the real world and we are still being treated as a child, I guess. That would be nice to change but then like something that I really like is the people there and like getting to know them really closely over the years.

MBW: Do you mean the other students, or teachers or both?

OF: Both.

SA: Do you think that is because of, well do you know how many students there are?

OF: Well, there is about 2,000 of us.

SA: OK.

CRO: I'm sorry, I am confused if you think they treat you like children, or they don't give you enough attention. Could you elaborate on that a little?

OF: More like treating us as a child kinda thing. There's a lot of rules. And not so much that they are bad, but like when we are thrown into the world they are not preparing us for paying bills or taxes or anything like that are necessary.

SA: Well we know that you were accepted into what was it like six universities? Right?

OF: Yeah.

SA: Have you made any decisions?

OF: I'm like 95% sure I'm going to be going to University of Dayton.

CRO: Could you tell us about this university? Where did you apply? And why did you apply there?

OF: My three choices were between Ohio Wesleyan, University of Dayton and DePaul University in Chicago and once I got closer to the decision it was really between Dayton and DePaul. But then I realized being closer to home might be better than being six hours away.

SA: What do you hope to study there?

OF: Psychology and minor in Pre-Law.

SA: Do you have any plans for the future that you know about?

OF: I just really want to study abroad pretty much. Get to see the world.

MBW: Do you know where you wanna go?

OF: Uh, Italy.

MBW: Can you talk about your involvement with the College Prep Bilingual Program?

OF: Since it began, yeah? Well, there were seniors last year from Kenyon, Alexa and Mary. And they came and at first it was just me and Mario and his little sister and cousin. They would go in and help us. For me it was ACT time, so ACT prep and then this year I got to work with your daughter (CRO's daughter) and then all the other seniors and I think there's some juniors in there too from Kenyon who help with college essays and it was nice.

CRO: Financial aid.

OF: Yeah, financial aid too.

MBW: How did you get involved in that program?

OF: My mom I think spoke with you (CRO) personally and she reached out her and then she told me about it and I was like "okay I'll give it a try" and I actually really liked it, so it was good.

SA: So you mentioned pre-law, do you have any career plans?

OF: I want to be a lawyer and then eventually go to the judge.

CRO: Can you speak a little bit about why you see yourself as a lawyer? What about it entices you to see yourself in that position?

OF: Okay, so ever since about the age of eight years old I was like you know one day I like woke up and was like "I want to be a lawyer" and so I told my parents about it and you know my really close family. And they were like, "Really are you sure about that, that's risky, even for

us,” because you know immigrants and all that stuff. So they kept asking are you sure about it. And I was like, “You know what, yeah.” I don’t want to keep the little cliché that lawyers are liars and all that and I want to make a difference in that aspect.

MBW: Is there a certain law you want to do?

OF: No, I haven’t decided.

CRO: Was your family supportive of this idea or more or less? How did this play out?

OF: I think my parents are the most supportive about it but it was like aunts and uncles who were hesitant about it and even my grandparents.

CRO: In what way?

OF: Like, they like came here illegally at first from Mexico. So they have this fear of the law and law enforcement and getting involved with government that's why they were like hesitant to even like to consider something like that for me.

MBW: So do you think there’s a big generational difference between how you view...

OF: Oh, yeah for sure.

SA: You said you look forward to seeing the world, do you plan on returning to Knox County or even Ohio after school?

OF: I don’t know. I’m not sure yet. Maybe

SA: It’s far away. (laughter) Are a lot of your friends or classmates going through the same process as you, like getting ready and going away for school?

OF: I think the majority are and think it's like hard because at the same time like I grew up with these people for the past like 8 years of my life and like right now or coming really close to the end.

SA: Do you think they see themselves in the future coming back here?

OF: I think some do and some are for sure no’s.

MDW: Do you have any sense of why people or your friends, would or wouldn't want to come back?

OF: I think some would but some I think are into the whole city life and like this is a very small town and they want to go see something more than what Mount Vernon has to offer.

SA: What do you personally like about living here. I know you mentioned the people in your highschool, but what specifically about this area do you like?

OF: I don't necessarily think it's the size but the people in it because I volunteer at the Knox Community Hospital and work at the front desk and talk to the people coming in and out and they are always very friendly with me. And so I think that is what draws me, and draws my attention.

CRO: Why do you volunteer?

OF: At first it was because I'm currently involved in Key Club which is like the community service organization thing so like they like offered it. And I thought it was like a pretty like a cool idea and a really easy way to get hours and so I decided to do it. And then I did it for the first time and I like absolutely fell in love with it because I just love the people there and when they would come and and sit with you and make a conversation even though they knew nothing about you and there was no judgement in it. And then I just continued it and continued it.

MBW: I'm just curious. You mentioned some of your classmates said they preferred a bigger city life and I grew up in a city and I am just wondering what you do for fun here?

OF: Okay so I am currently involved with key club which is a community service thing so there's a lot of like community service things that I do. I also do Orchestra. So I play the violin. And then besides spending time with my family I think just a couple hangouts here and there with friends.

MBW: Are there certain certain stores or places where teenagers hang out here?

OF: I think here it would probably be Whit's and for like me, I am one of the only Mexicans at school, so like when I go to Fiesta Mexicana (laughter) It is always fun to do that with them, so.

MBW: Do you have any other Latino or Latina friends at school?

OF: I think in our grade, it is just me and her so we just converse and do a lot together.

MBW: Can you talk a little bit about how your Latina identity has shaped your experience either in high school or just in living here?

OF: It's like hard cause you grow up and then you're thrown into a place where you're the only one. And so like diversity, and you're like, "What if I'm not like them?" and it goes into this whole thing where their parents have already gone to college and it's like I haven't. It's hard.

MBW: Can you think of a particular moment or story when you've been particularly conscience?

OF: Sometimes it's like the music taste. Cause I like to listen to music in Spanish and they're talking about Drake and Rihanna and it's like, I can't relate! (Laughter)

MBW: Are you bilingual?

OF: Yeah.

MBW: I don't know if you plan on having children, but if you do, do you think that's something you plan on passing on to them?

OF: Absolutely. I think it's important to show people not only your own culture, but for them to embrace their own. To be proud of their roots, type deal.

MBW: What do you think is the biggest problem here that needs to be addressed?

OF: I think it's the viewpoint. You grow up one way and you're not... what's the word I'm searching for... introduced to other cultures and other people's views. So you're always stuck on one thing. You need to be open minded about other people's views and find that balance in understanding why they view things that certain way.

CRO: Do you see this community as a unified community?

MBW: Or as many different small communities?

OF: I think it is a mixture of both. It's not like one set way where it's like, "This is how it's supposed to be," type deal, but it's not everyone separates themselves from another.

MBW: Do you find yourself, as one of a few people who comes from a background other people might not know much about, do you find yourself having to be like the person who has to explain?

OF: Yeah, All the time. (Laughter)

MBW: Can you talk about how that feels like and how people perceive that.

OF: Well it's like growing up they'd find out I spoke Spanish. The question they always ask is teach me something in Spanish, say something in Spanish. And it's like, well what do you want me to say and often it's curse words that I don't really want to do type of deal so that and then the whole thing was a quinceañera thing, so the coming of age when you turn 15 to and I was fortunate enough that they made my day, my parents provided that for me. And that was another thing where they were like, "Why do you do that? what's the difference between that and a sweet 16?"

MBW: Did you invite your non Latino friends to your quinceañera?

OF: Yes.

MBW: What was that like?

OF: It was fun. I think I would have liked it more if I had invited them to like a family members because I never had that one on one time because I was constantly busy and had to like say hi to everyone else, so it was difficult but it was nice, they enjoyed it so.

CRO: Did you have explain to them it all, because this is a ritual! You know it is a stage experience and there's a story behind it, so did you have to explain all of that before the quincenera? Or did they ask the questions afterward?

OF: It like happened in middle school, where they like and they come up to me like, "What is a quinceañera? What is it? What is like? What does it mean? Is it the same thing as a sweet sixteen?" And so like it went into this whole conversation about it and then they were very intrigued about it and they love that quinceañera would always wear this like poofy dress and they would compare it to prom and it's not just that, it's more.

MBW: Do you mind having to be the person who explains things like that all the time?

OF: I love it (Laughter) It is always fun to share your views with someone else.

MBW: How do you think that has shaped your personality or identity?

OF: Well at first, when I first came here, I was like a very shy little girl who didn't want to talk with anyone type deal, so when people that came up to me and ask me questions that like forced me to open up a little bit more.

SA: You know you are talking a little bit about cultural values, and this is a hard question, but can you talk about what it means to you to be a Latina, and what part of your culture do you really value?

OF: I think it just means to be proud of your roots. Proud of who you are and not really worry about all the criticism that comes along with and something that I value the most is I think it has to be the quinceañera thing. It is the whole "Coming of Age" thing. Right now my sister is going to be fourteen in May. So she's been all over this since he was like five.

MBW: So, you said like not being worried about the criticism, do you find that there is a lot of criticism?

OF: Yeah. You're surrounded by one certain race like all the time so like when you're introduced to something new it's hard to like accept it or maybe accept their views a little bit. So then when you like grow up with that it's different, so like it's common for that.

MBW: So do you find that in those moments when you have to explain something, like your quinceañera, or something people have never heard of, are people usually excited to learn about it?

OF: More often than not they're extremely excited to learn something new I think they get very anxious to hear more and more and so I think that's always nice.

SA: Does your family members have similar experiences as you? I mean, do they feel the same way about it as you do, because you're very positive. Do they have similar feelings about explaining or just feeling different?

OF: I don't know. But I think most do and like they're very open to it and then others weren't in the same situation that I was, so I guess it's different for everyone.

CRO: Are you excited about college? And what are your expectations and what are you imagining and why are you excited about it?

OF: I don't know. I can't explain it. I think it because I am a first generation student, so to like bring back that college diploma after 4 years and to show them, like I don't know. It's nice.

CRO: Are you looking forward to meeting other people different than Mount Vernon?
(Laughter)

OF: Yeah!! (Laughter) I'm very excited. I want to make new friends and hope for a better experience there too.

MBW: This is, sorry, just to backtrack into being a minority in a community like this. Are there certain, since most people here are white, are there certain places or situations where you get to really feel your identity as a Latina more strongly than in others? Or do you feel like there's any sort of community or camaraderie among Latinos in the area?

OF: I think it's any time I go to Fiesta Mexicana type deal, I guess because those are my people there too I guess. (Laughter) I feel a little bit calmer there because I am surrounded by people that have pretty much endured the same things that I have compared to me going to Walmart or something where it's just... yeah.

CRO: So Fiesta Mexicana is a focus?

OF: Yeah. There, and Church. Because every last Sunday of the month they do it in Spanish and that's where everybody goes and it feels more comfortable.

MBW: Can you think of like a story that really captures what it's like to live here?

OF: I am not sure I can think of one off the top of my head...

MBW: Or if you were to describe it to someone who has never been here before, like how would you do that?

OF: I would tell them like it is a very small town with not so much diversity in it, but once you get involved with the town and involved with the people, you get a lot out of it and you get a sweet tone to it I guess.

MBW: So, would you say, there's so much like stuff happening downtown, like I mean this building (the Wright Center) and the park and stuff. How do you envision the future of this area. Are you optimistic about it? Are there things you are worried about?

OF: I think more often than not I feel like right now there's a lot more diversity than there was six years ago, so I mean that is always like a plus side because this community is growing and it's getting bigger. And so maybe to some that's like scary because this is how it's always been

like a certain way for so many years, but now... I don't know, change is good, and I am looking forward to it.

MBW: How do you think you could, or I guess not you specifically, like how could the community make those people who are maybe scared about that, like how do you think you could bring them around to be more optimistic about it?

OF: I think right now like the biggest issue is just communication. Like opening up to them, learning their story, and then learning my own story and getting to know both.

MBW: Do you think people are willing to do that?

OF: I don't know. I think it all just depends on the person, but I am hoping they would be.

MBW: How do you think Mount Vernon, or I guess, all of the county is perceived by people who, well I guess you didn't used to live here, but yeah by people who do not live here or have never been here?

OF: I think they would notice this is a pretty small county with not very much diversity type deal so, I think that is a big thing. But, I mean overall once like you get involved I think the biggest thing is like getting involved with the community. That's when you realize that there's like something more to it than what is perceived.

MBW: So what are some of the ways, I guess you do the volunteering, but what are some of the ways beyond that, even like not necessarily formally, but what are some ways you interact with your community?

OF: I think just communicating with everyone. You see people down the street, say hello, opening doors for people just common generosity towards others.

MBW: Do you feel like you see people you know everywhere?

OF: All the time!! (Laughter) Especially Kroger

MBW: Do you like that?

OF: Personally, I would like to go like in the middle not like city life, city life but not like small town life.

SA: So Dayton will be that right?

OF: Yeah!! (Laughter)

SA: So in college, when you're thinking about home, well first, do you expect to be homesick a lot? And if so, what do you think you will be homesick for, or miss the most? And, how do you think you'll remember home when you're away?

OF: I think pictures is a big thing. But I think the thing I am going to miss the most is the food. Because I am not going to be used to American food and stuff. I went to Florida recently in the beginning of March, we went to Disney, and it was a whole bunch of fast food type deal and by the end of the trip I wanted to go home and eat a nice home cooked meal

CRO: Did you go with your family? Or friends?

OF: It was a trip, a school trip thing, the the orchestra and the whole music department type so we went and we went for six days I think. It was nice.

MBW: So it sounds like, I mean you've been talking about how like your family eats mostly Mexican food, so it sounds like your family does a really, or makes an effort to maintain that culture. Has that been hard at all or how has your family made an effort to do that?

OF: I don't know. Most of it is just the experience of it. It's very hard to explain because my mom isn't originally from Mexico but both of her parents are and my dad is originally from Mexico and he was raised completely with a Mexican tradition type deal. So then both of them combined, they make the effort to certain... like the hat thing that Mexican hat culture thing they try to combine in there, food is a big one, music, dance, just the whole quinceanera thing, just any kind of little tradition, they try to stick it in there.

MBW: You might not remember but, you said you lived in Columbus for two years?

OF: No, I lived in Chicago until I was three, then we moved here, then I lived there until I was in fifth grade, so what? Like ten years old maybe? Something like that in Columbus.

MBW: Ok, so when you were in Columbus, I don't know if you would remember, well I guess you were old enough, well I don't know....

OF: (Laughter)

MBW: From your memory, does Knox County feel very different from Columbus?

OF: Yeah, cause in Columbus, you see a lot more diversity in it and a lot more people, and I got back there now sometimes and it's gotten even bigger than what I remembered and then I guess that is kind of what's happening in Knox County here too, but it is still like smaller than Columbus.

CRO: I wanted to ask you of that experience of growing up bicultural. Eating the food, but being American, listening to the music in Spanish, but also listening to the music in English, going to mass in Spanish, and also going to mass in English, and growing up with a family that values those roots, and I wanted to ask you about that biculturalism. Do you see that as advantageous to you. If yes, then in what ways? And how do you think you can capitalize in that experience?

OF: I think it is more advantageous than disadvantageous because there are some aspects where you, you grow up with two different mindsets. You grow with the American mindset and with a Mexican mindset. And sometimes you find yourself not being American enough or sometimes you find yourself not being Mexican enough. So you have to learn to combine both into one. I think that that is a biggie. Still learning about both and understanding every little detail of both is what like makes you a better person, once you decide and understand both.

CRO: And richer huh? You have a richer and more complex perspective of the world, because you have two different views and have them deeply, yeah?

OF: Yeah.

CRO: How do you think that border crossing, you're crossing cultural borders here how do you think that'll help the world? Meaning Knox county, Dayton, your world in twenty years from now?

OF: I think if you just learn to understand people, again if you just... especially with the election, and people were so dead set on one point of view.... And they weren't putting in everyone else's perspective. So, if you've already been introduced to their perspective, and your own perspective, you learn to meet in the middle, and you learn to say okay...I think this certain way, let me understand why...just being open to it, and just communication

MBW: So do you think people can learn to meet in the middle, like that?

OF: I would hope so. I really hope so.

CRO: And you think that biculturalism is a way to get there, then? It is a way of enabling that to happen.

OF: Yes.

MBW: Can you talk about how you said sometimes you do not feel American enough or Mexican enough. Can you talk about what that means?

OF: Growing up it was hard because like I was a fifth grader and it was the first time I lived here and I want to do like anything and everything American, like what they were doing like hanging out with friends and having sleepovers and things of that nature and stuff. And when you grow up in a Mexican culture like sleepovers and things is like a dangerous thing, not as much like free boundary type thing, I'm not sure how to explain that one. (Laughter) So there is always that fear. That's a biggie and so then if you're too Americanized or whatever it's like well what about your culture, what about being proud of your Mexican soccer team or listen to Mexican music, because you are grown up in that aspect so hard to meet in the middle, and be like I understand this way and I also understand this way.

MBW: Yeah.

CRO: I will like to ask you a last question, if I am allowed, but it doesn't have to do with Knox County, how do you think Latinos contribute to this nation? This is a nation of immigrants, you are not the first one...

OF: (Laughter)

CRO: So many people have come here, built a life, had children. What is it of the immigrant that makes it good for this country? I mean, you were talking about closeness and people who are, a situation, a historical moment where people are not communicating with each other and set on their...

OF: Their own ways their personal views...I think it's the communication thing again. And we are like we're providing you guy, or society with new information, a new culture, a new Perspective and even more often than not, we are not just lazing around and just doing nothing for a living we are contributing to society in general we work, we educate ourselves, we're just trying to make a life for ourselves, just like anyone else would.

MBW: I asked if you were optimistic about the county, but again more broadly, are you optimistic about the future of the country, of the world...

OF: I want to be. (Laughter) I want to think so.

CRO: Let me ask a question about Kenyon. Kenyon belongs to Knox County, having been here for so many years. What is the perception among the Latinos is you know that, or among Knox County, or Mount Vernon high school community of Kenyon college, if you know and want to share that.

OF: I don't know their perspective.

MBW: Is it something that is talked about or thought about ever?

OF: I think there is some where their parents like graduated from Kenyon, or went to Kenyon and so like also, that's their dream too. So think that is one aspect of it. I don't know it depends. Because some people have been here, their grandparents are from here, their parents are from here, so that's what they want to do here, they want to keep the tradition going. And there are others, like in my situation, like where I've come here, I've experienced it, but I don't think I want to stay here type deal.

MBW: Do you think your family will live here for the foreseeable future?

OF: I think that they want to, because they like the aspect of it, but then I think they don't really like the winter (Laughter) that could also change.

SA: You said your dad was a carpenter, and your mom?

OF: Stay at home mom.

MBW: So, you said "they love," what do they love about it?

OF: They love the community for one. My dad grew up on a ranch when he was in Mexico. So, right now we own a farm, so he loves being outside, constantly doing things with the animals and stuff. So I think that is one great thing. And my mom grew up in the city! And to be completely separated from the city ahh... she loves it.

MBW: So does your dad like farm?

OF: He does it for fun. So he has horses and cows and just being around animals and stuff like that.

MBW: Do you ever hang out with the animals or help out?

OF: Ahhh not very often (laughter) every once in awhile.

MBW: Do you like living somewhere so isolated or rural?

OF: A little bit. But again, I want to be in the middle of rural, and the middle of a city type deal.

MBW: Well is there anything else you feel like we like really should know about you, or Knox County or latinos in Knox County?

OF: I don't think so.

SA: We covered a lot of stuff.

CRO: Yeah, we really did, thank you so much!!