

EDWINA M. SALAZAR. Born 1943.

TRANSCRIPT of OH 1854V

This interview was recorded on July 10, 2013, for the Boulder County Latino History Project and the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. The interviewer is Eivaldo Valdez. The interview also is available in video format, filmed by Veronica Lamas and Deisy De Luna. The interview was transcribed by Deisy De Luna.

ABSTRACT: Edwina Salazar is the executive director of the OUR Center in Longmont, Colorado. She was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1948. Her father's family, originally of Jewish origin, was from Northern New Mexico but had moved to the San Luis Valley in Colorado. Her mother's family members were farm workers who settled in Erie. Ms. Salazar attended a liberal Catholic school in the 1960s where the nuns and priests were active in civil rights and anti-war movements. Her mother, who died when Edwina was 14, cleaned houses and insisted Edwina get an education so she could do better. Ms. Salazar attended Colorado State University in Fort Collins where she discovered her passion for social work. She describes civil rights and anti-war agitation while she was there. She has bachelor's and master's degrees in social work. She moved to Longmont in 1992, where she helped arrange for a monument in Kensington Park for two unarmed Hispanic youths killed by police in 1980. She describes the OUR Center and her work with it.

NOTE: The interviewer's questions and comments appear in parentheses. Added material appears in brackets.

[A].

00:00

(Good afternoon. Today is July the 10, 2013. My name is Eivaldo Valdez, and I'll be interviewing Edwina Salazar, who is the executive director of the OUR Center in Longmont, Colorado.

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And with that, good afternoon. Could you tell us when and where you were born?)

I was born in Denver, Colorado, on December 20th of 1948.

(What can you tell us about your family's history?)

Well, my family—my father's family, was one of the settlers of the San Luis Valley in Colorado.

[Pause]

The Salazar family is actually of Jewish heritage. They are that group of Jews that traveled to Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado when Colorado was still part of Mexico. They were settled there when the U.S. took over that territory. But had originally come from southern Spain, settled in Mexico City, and the Inquisition followed them. They converted to Catholicism but they moved north, to the northern Santa Fe territory. Some of my family is still there today.

(Do you have some vivid recollections about your early childhood?)

Yes.

(If so, what are they?)

I really loved visiting in the San Luis Valley. My family moved to—my father moved to Denver after World War II. He became a barber. He met my mother in Denver. But my father still had a real strong bond to the San Luis Valley. We would very often—since he was a barber, he had Monday off, so we would get in the car on Saturday night and travel that distance and spend Sunday in the San Luis Valley. And come home on Monday in the summer time.

It was always a beautiful place to visit because we would camp at the river, at the Conejos River. It's near the Rio Grande Range, and we would visit the mountains, so we had great times there.

(Can you tell us about your immediate family? Your nuclear family?)

Okay, my family—I have a daughter and her name is Natalie Salazar Waldrip [?]. She's 33 years old and at this time she lives with me, but she's an actor, and she's planning to move to L.A. to try an acting career there. She has an agent now, so she's hopeful that she can get an agent in L.A. and start an acting career. I just have one child.

I am divorced. I have been divorced about four years now, but I have huge family. I have two brothers, two sisters. I have a sister that lives here, she's an engineering technician. I have a brother who's an engineer. He's coming out to visit in a few weeks, and I have a brother in Denver. And a sister in Omaha. Then I have about a hundred first-degree cousins. My father had twelve brothers and sisters, and my mother had nine brothers and sisters. So I have relatives everywhere, and it's a very great feeling to have so many people supporting you and loving you and having—we have great family reunions where there are 200 or 300 people there.

(If you give some thought to that, can you think some of the more intimate little conversations that you had with your mom, your dad, or any one of your relatives that would sort of reflect on your history and the impressions it had on you?)

Yeah! My family actually has some roots in Boulder County. My great-grandparents are buried in the Erie cemetery, the old historic Erie cemetery.

[Train noise. Video stopped.]

4:56

[Recording resumes] (Let's continue with our discussion about your extended family and your relationship to them.)

Yep. So I am very close to my mother's family. Growing up we spent a lot of time with my grandmother as well. What was really remarkable about my grandmother is—my grandmother and grandfather traveled around Colorado working on farms, he worked in the mines in the Carbon Valley, and they had a hard life.

But my grandmother had a beautiful spirit and was always one of the most positive, faith-filled person you would ever want to meet. She had a lot of hardship in her life but she never lost that really positive spirit. She was probably one of the most compassionate people you would ever want to meet. She was always helping other people. She actually ended up owing her own house, which I think was almost unheard of for people really growing up in poverty and really living most of their lives in poverty. She owned a house in Denver, and that was really a wonderful place to visit because I would just stand by her side and she would make tortillas and—.

I remember the oddest thing I thought she made was tomato jelly. I had never known anyone else ever to make tomato jelly. So my fondest memories are just standing by her side, cooking and eating whatever she made as she made it. I was very close to my grandmother. I'm her oldest grandchild so I'm the oldest of about 50 cousins on that side of the family.

Then my father's family, as I said earlier, he had twelve brothers and sisters. What I knew about them is that there were so many kids in that family that really his older sisters ended up raising him. He didn't have a lot of contact with the parents because there were so many children to be raised at that time. Both my grandmothers had children in the space of 25 years.

So, on my mother's side I have an aunt that is just three years older than I am. That was a very interesting experience because she didn't really like the idea of having a niece so close in age. We were in high school at the same time; she would actually introduce me as her cousin rather than her niece.

[Laughs]

So I would always have something over her in terms of having a little secret that she didn't want anybody to know that she had a niece so close in age to her.

So growing up in a large family was really a gift.

(Do you recall any single incident that you may reflect back on time and time again that either had a lasting effect on your memory or that—either positive or negative, you recall it yet today?)

From my family, from my extended family? I think the funerals were always—I remember my grandmother taking me to wedding and funerals. That always had a lasting impact with me. I feel like I am more comfortable with death as a result. Because I was exposed to a lot of it. I'm not sure why my grandmother took me to the funerals, but I remember attending a lot of funerals with her.

When she died someone gave me a photo of her in the casket, and I used to use it as a bookmark. I gave a friend a book and the bookmark was still in there. She was very astounded that I would feel comfortable with a photo of a dead person.

But I was comfortable because it was my grandmother and we loved each other very much. But also it didn't shock me to have a photo of a dead person because—I think partially because I've been to all those funerals and seen all those open caskets and I just feel that it's important to remember people and that's one way of remembering them. So that was one memory.

10:00

(Let's move on now to your adolescent years and maybe move into some of your college experiences. What are the most memorable memories that you had about your high school days? And then move on with that same topic into your college experience. Anything that might have—speak about what effect they had on shaping who you are today.)

I attended eleven years of Catholic school, so there was just one year when we moved to Thornton, Colorado, when there wasn't a Catholic school there. So I went to public school for one year.

I have really vivid memories of the Sisters. They were very, very strict. They used a lot of corporal punishment. I think one of the worst days of my life was getting spanked. Somebody talked in the restroom, and the whole class of fourth grade girls got spanked. They were very, very strict, and I remember thinking about how unfair that was.

It was a whole different time in education, I think, especially Catholic education, where corporal punishment was just used every day on children. I was just very upset and angry about that, because I didn't think children should be hit.

(In hindsight, what are your feelings about the academic preparation that you had going to a Catholic school?)

I think that in high school I was very well prepared for college. They had a really big focus on writing and math. I think I did get a good education for college. The Sisters, although they were

the same order in elementary school, were a lot kinder than the elementary school Sisters. Also, the priests were teachers.

It was in the '60's, so it was a time when the church was more liberal. We actually got sex education and a pretty in-depth sex education class. My brother and I marvel at it today because this isn't even taught in public school, that level of sex education. We had a really good classical education in terms of English literature and history. So I thought I got a good preparation.

But it was kind of a tumultuous time too in the '60's, and it was just learning about civil rights and learning about protests. There were a group of nuns—Sisters, and priests—in Denver who were part of anti-war protests and civil rights' protests. So it was an exciting time to grow up and to observe that, and then also to participate in it in college.

The civil rights movement was growing strong. I remember the Vietnam War, there was one of my high school classmates that was killed early in the war, just right out of high school, and then one of my college classmates that was killed. So I was very much against the war myself and participated in protest in college. I was a little concerned though because I actually had a summer job in the defense industry in California. There was a lot of talk and rumor about people being spied upon, and records being kept about people who protested. I remember the day the war ended officially was a very happy day because that was always in my prayers about the war ending, the Vietnam War.

(Before we move in to a discussion in-depth about your college experience and such, tell us about that transition between high school and college. At what point during your high school years did you decide or somebody decided for you that you were gonna go to college? What were the specific preparations that you went through to be able to get into—)

Into college?

(—college.)

14:58

Okay. Actually when I was four years old I have a vivid memory of my mother telling me that I was going to finish high school. My mother, in eighth grade had to quit school to go to work to help support her family. She told me that she washed floors for wealthy people for a quarter a floor, 25 cents, and that she wasn't going to have a daughter of hers end up without an education. That was always a vivid memory of mine.

But my mother died when I was fourteen. And she was sick—I essentially didn't have a mother as a parent for about three years. She became ill when I was eleven, and it was in the days when they kept people in hospitals. So she was sick from about eleven to about thirteen, she was sick off and on. But when I was about twelve-thirteen she spent a year in the hospital. So I essentially

didn't have a full-time mother between eleven and fourteen, and then she died when I was fourteen.

But her gift to me was the value of education. Her death even made a stronger commitment in me to honor her memory by finishing school and by going to college.

(Did you have some peer support?)

I have always had a lot of friends, and my friends were always high achievers academically. So I had that peer support. All my good friends went on to college. Then I think that in Catholic school that was an expectation. We were helped to apply for scholarships and to different colleges. The only thing I think I didn't see in my world view then was going out of state to college. That really wasn't in my perspective that, if it would be now, I might have considered going some other place. I have relatives in California so I spend two summers in California working and staying with them. They always wanted me to go to college there. But I was tied to Colorado; I always thought that I'd go to school.

(Tell us, where did you eventually enroll and describe your student life for us?)

I went to CSU. This was a big culture shock for me, because my graduating class was 200 kids; there were 800 kids in this Catholic school that I went to. My first class that I went to at CSU was 400 kids, there were 400 kids in the class. It was a history class. That was mind-boggling to me. There was no really individual attention. I didn't feel like I got good advising about what classes to take. I floundered my first year of college. I had good friends, but I graduated the 9th in my class from high school. And I struggled academically the first year in college.

But what did happen in my sophomore year is I discovered what I wanted to do. I took my first social work class. And I knew that that really was what I wanted to do. That was kind of the occupation that I was leaning towards, but I decided that that was it for me. That was really my calling.

When I was in high school I was in a car accident, and I had a broken neck, a broken arm, and broken ribs, and I had all of the flesh and skin scraped off of my knees. So I was in the hospital for about most of my first semester of high school, and I was really concerned about not graduating. Because of course that was my goal and my mother's goal for me, but I got a lot of help to graduate. The nuns and then there was a social-worker that came to visit me. Because my father didn't have a lot of resources, they actually got things for me to be able to read the books and to turn in the school work. I really appreciated that social-worker's help, and I've always thought I would like to be able to help people like that.

So when I discovered these social-work classes at CSU, [I realized that] this is really what I want to do in my life. I really want help people and help them reach their goals.

As soon as I discovered what it is I wanted to do, my academics improved tremendously. I just started doing well in school, I was getting As and Bs. It was as if I needed to discover my calling in order to be focus and directed.

21:08

(Can you talk a little about the social and political atmosphere at CSU? How did you or did you not participate?)`

There were lots of protests, and I did participate and someone burned down Old Main during that time I was there. They actually burned in protest. They burned one of the college buildings, it was the oldest building on campus.

(And the target of course was the Vietnam War?)

Yeah, there was a lot of unexplainable disorder. How does it help the war if you're burning a building? That didn't make sense to me. But I did participate in—I saw Ralph Abernathy, there was a speech there by Ralph Abernathy and other anti-war protestors. And also civil rights protestors. It was during that time that Martin Luther King was killed, and I went to a vigil after his death. I remember thinking about our country and about other people trying to squelch other people's freedom through killing them and through violence.

Kent State happened during that period of time. And it had a great impact on me [that] the response to a protest is violence and how useless those deaths were because all those young people were doing it, much like me, were just protesting the war. How it didn't make any sense to respond with violence.

(Very good, thank you. Let's begin now to focus a little bit onto Boulder and Boulder County.)

Okay.

(At what point in your life did you come into Boulder County? And what were the circumstances that brought you here?)

I've been here 20 years, almost 21. I was actually living in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and I had lived in Cheyenne quite a while, over 20 years. I moved there from CSU. I actually spent the last year at CSU commuting from Cheyenne to Fort Collins to finish my degree.

I always wanted to move back to Colorado. I wanted to finish raising my daughter here, because I wanted her to be raised in a place that was more tolerant of differentness. My daughter is an unconventional person, I don't think she would mind me saying that. She has a lot of different views. She's a vegan; since she was eight years old, she has not eaten meat. That literally was a problem for her in Cheyenne. It was difficult to find [laughs] anything to eat. It's a beef-producing place.

[Laughs]

I wanted her to experience a different culture, essentially, and move back here.

(What was it that brought you to Boulder County?)

My sister lives here, and I have cousins here. It was not as big as Denver, and it really appealed to me as a small town atmosphere, a growing place, and having really community spirit. I was always impressed with Longmont, so I moved here.

25:09

(Very good. And the sequence of employment?)

I actually worked in Denver for two years at Big Sisters of Colorado. I really loved the job of facilitating mentoring of young women. That very much appealed to me. I really believe in coaching and mentoring. I think that's a process that is affirming for both people, for the people that are being mentored and the people that are actually in those relationships. I believe that change takes place through relationships and people's lives can be transformed through having supportive relationships. So that was a great job.

However, the commute was very difficult, and it took me too many hours away from my family and my daughter. So I looked for a job here. I was hired at the city in a new youth project, a neighborhood youth project, it was called, Longmont: A Community that Cares. It was designed to make resources more accessible to the neighborhoods, to the youth in the neighborhoods; it was very much connected with the youth center and developing resources for youth development. I really loved that job, that's when I really got to know Longmont and really came to appreciate Longmont for the outstanding spirited community that it is.

(Did you encounter any circumstance or series of circumstances that may have proven to be a challenge and/or an inspiration to you as you entered the world of work here?)

Yeah. One of the most profound experiences that I had concerned the Kensington neighborhood, the neighborhood in which the two young man were killed in the '80s by the police ["On August 14, 1980, a Longmont police officer shot and killed two Hispanic residents, Juan Louis Garcia and Jeff Cordova, after a routine traffic stop. This tragedy forced the Hispanic and Anglo communities to work together to prevent further violence." —from a Longmont Museum History of Longmont web page]. We had some resources to create a work of art in Kensington Park, and that work of art is still there. It's that mosaic, the adobe mosaic that sits in the middle of the park. When we brought the community and the artist together to create the mural, they developed a theme of the neighborhood, and one of the incidents they wanted to place in the mural was the incident where the young men were killed. To honor them and to honor their families, because their families are still nearby.

However, as it became known that that was what we were going to do, some of the officials that were there, that were present in the city at the time that the incident took place, disagreed with honoring the two young men who died.

I actually received racist phone calls. Now at the time I was married and I wasn't using my last name Salazar, so I think some of them did not know who they were talking to, because they were phone calls. It was difficult to deal with because something so beautiful and designed to commemorate human beings who suffered because of racism and discrimination was challenged by the powers that existed at that time.

However, we went on to persevere and to create the mural. It's still there. It still commemorates the neighborhood and the neighborhood's history. I'm really proud to have been part of that time. But it also was a flash back to a different time when racism was very open in Longmont, and where there were signs in the windows, "No Mexicans, No Dogs" and people told those stories while we were producing that work of art.

(And were you able to bring together your feeling of being a change agent with the requirements of your job?)

30:07

Yes, I was. I really felt that I was able to better connect the neighborhoods with government. We had many, many public meetings where we facilitated the police officers talking with the neighborhoods and creating that community policing culture that Longmont has today. I worked greatly—got to know the police department, Mike Butler, and Gordon Peter was City Manager at the time, Karen Roney was my supervisor. We had many facilitated meetings where we brought the community, and the police, and the city departments together. Really enhancing those relationships to create change in the community. So I was happy to be part of that.

(We interviewers know very little about the OUR Center [Outreach United Resource Center, Inc.], but it appears that what you are telling us was very, very good preparation for the work that you currently do. Can we now focus on the OUR Center and your present position? Tell us, describe for us if you would, the role of the OUR Center in the Longmont community, and describe in detail the services that are provided.)

The OUR Center is the safety net for people in need in Longmont. We provide the elements of survival that help people get through a time of crisis and then hopefully move on to self-sufficiency. So we provide everything that people need to continue to survive in a tough economy.

We provide food; we have a very large feeding program. We can serve up to 400 people a day in our feeding program. We have a food pantry that gives people a pretty substantial amount of food to keep their families free from hunger.

We have family shelter; we provide a way for families when they have no place to live to have a holding place where hopefully they can move on to more stable housing. We have a homelessness prevention program that [provides] rent and utility assistance and other kinds of assistance that helps them to hold on to their homes if they are at risk of losing their homes.

We have day services for single people that are homeless. If they are looking for a job, we're a postal substation, they can get their mail, they can get shower vouchers, laundry vouchers, and food. They can get referral to job programs, and we also actually have a medical prescription program; we can help people with their co-pays and with their glasses. We can refer people to dental services. Over and above that we have all kinds of support for self-sufficiency, and I think this is where the relationships and the change agent function that I really believe in comes in. We have classes that help people gain the skills to become self-sufficient, we really join with them to help themselves, raise themselves up.

(Do you do the screening yourself or are your clients already referred to you, having been determined to be eligible for the services?)

No, we do the screening ourselves. We get referrals from other agencies from our partners. That's another part of relationship building is we really strive to have good relationships with our partners, where we have a back-and-forth communication and understanding of what we provide, what they can provide. We communicate about our clients, our mutual clients. Good relationships are really important in this business, because we really rely on other people and other agencies to give a full complement of resources so people can move forward in their lives.

(Describe for us if you would who are your partners.)

One of our strong partners is the Inn-Between. We actually have about fifteen clients right now who we are case managing. Their model is, if we refer a client and they are accepted, we're still responsible for that referral. We case-manage them, so we give them the support services through that case-management relationship: coaching, mentoring them to self-sufficiency. We have a constant communication with them.

We are good partners with the Emergency Family Assistance and their Atwood Family Shelter. It's right up the street, and we actually screen the clients for that program. Then they take the clients that we refer there—if they have space.

35:40

(Just to give us an idea of some the partners, once they received the shower vouchers, where in fact do they go to the showers themselves?)

It's a partnership with the City of Longmont Rec Department. They can redeem them in the city facilities that have showers. Then we're a postal substation. Since we are partners with the post office we can actually allow people to use our address as their mailing address when they're homeless and they don't have an address. They can receive their mail here.

(What was the situation in Longmont prior to the existence of the OUR Center? And by the way, would you describe the acronym and tell us how that fits into the services that you provide?)

It's Outreach United Resource Center, so that's the O-U-R.

In 1986, the Salvation Army closed its Samaritan House—the Catholic Church closed its Samaritan House, the Salvation Army closed their clothing bank. It was a recession just like we're coming out of right now, where there weren't resources for these organizations. A church, Central Presbyterian, the minister there got together with other ministers and they noticed that people were going without, that they were going from church, to church, to church for help. That wasn't efficient; they were either duplicating services or not getting served.

So he united the community of Longmont, he brought government organizations together, non-profits, and 26 churches founded the OUR Center at that time. We opened our doors. One of our buildings came from the Catholic Church, it was moved on to this site. This building we're in came from Longmont United Hospital. The building on the corner has always been there in many reiterations. But it was a total community effort.

(And the churches either collectively or individually continue to be partners with you?)

Yes. In fact, 52 churches are partners with us, either contribute cash resources, food, and volunteers. So it's been a steadfast, reliable support.

(How about the service clubs in the city of Longmont?)

We have a great response from the service clubs. All the Rotary clubs support us in one degree or another. Kiwanas does, any of the other service clubs. There are lots of women's clubs that support the OUR Center.

(Very good. The next question, I think you've already alluded to in a sense, but without putting words in your mouth, let me ask you this question. You obviously have developed a professional philosophy for yourself. Can you tell us what that philosophy is, and how you incorporate that thinking into the manner in which you address your leadership role?)

Well, first of all, I'm a social worker. I have the bachelor's degree in social work, but I also have a master's degree in social work. And with that comes a professional orientation, a professional

value system. I always use that as my rudder, as a guiding force in whatever leadership I have. We have an ethical code in social work that we respect everyone, no matter who or what they are, that we honor differences, and that we value difference. It's not only honoring it, but our society is a richer society if we value difference. I use that as my rudder, that we really are a healthier society if we value difference.

I also believe in empowerment, helping people to be everything that they can be, and helping them to identify their gifts, what they are good at. I actually coach them and mentor them in their gifts.

I'm most proud of a group I started; it was called "Las Muchachitas" when I was with the City of Longmont. It was a mentoring group, and we had about seven young women on that. The wonders of Facebook have connected me with five of those young women, and I'm really proud to say that they are doing very, very well. They were Latina young woman who were at risk in their education, and they are doing extremely well.

40:47

(In very general terms can you give us a break down of the ethnicity of the individuals that you service?)

About 45% are Latinos and 55% are either white or we have a growing African-American population and some Native Americans and some Asian.

(Very good. The next scripted question that we had is one that I'm going to edit a little bit, and I want to ask you the question in this fashion. If your grandmother was sitting next you right now, what would she tell you about the work that you've done?)

I think she would be very proud of me. And I think she would hold my hand, and I think she would give me a kiss and a hug and tell me she was proud of me.

(Would she tell you that you're doing exactly what she had expected you to?)

Yes, I think so.

(Very good. In general that is all of the questions we've prepared to discuss with you, but we want to give you the opportunity: is there anything else that you would want to say in closing? Either to us as part of this interview and/or as a message to young ladies, young men out in the community? Because this interview will be available to anybody who wants to view it through the library system.)

I would say get as much education as you can and to value education. But also to find out who you are and go in the direction of who you are. It may not be the kind of education that everyone else wants you to get. But figure out who you really are as person, what your gifts and talents

are, who you are from the inside out. Discover that, and go in that direction, and gear your education to that direction. Find whatever educational program, experiences, will help you to really live out who you are.

(And did you wanted to say anything? [speaking to the videographer])

(Deisy: I got my answers, because I wanted to learn more about the OUR Center, so you did answer all of them.)

Oh. Okay.

(With that we do thank you for your time.)

Well, thank you.

(I know that I speak for Veronica and Deisy when I tell you that the information that we've gained from our discussion with you is something that is inspiring to each one of us. I personally feel privileged to be among those that is a friend of yours.)

Thank you. I feel privileged to be interviewed; I was very surprised when I was asked.

(Thank you very much.)

Thank you.

44:08

[End of interview.]