

## **ELVIRA RAMOS.**

### **TRANSCRIPT of OH 1894**

This interview was recorded on August 14, 2013, for the Boulder County Latino History Project and the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. The interviewer is Margaret Alfonso. The interview was transcribed by Veronica Lamas.

**ABSTRACT:** Elvira Ramos is Director of Programs at The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County. She talks about her experience of growing up in Indiana and her roots in Brownsville, Texas. Her ancestors have lived in the Rio Grande Valley for many generations, and both of her parents were born in Brownsville, Texas. After World War II, her parents moved to Indiana, where her father worked in the steel mills. Her mother graduated from high school, but was not allowed to go to college. Her parents were active in the Democratic Party and in helping new Latino immigrants in the area. Although both of her parents spoke Spanish, Elvira was not taught the language because her parents had been punished and held back in school because for speaking Spanish. Elvira received her bachelor's degree in English at Indiana University in Bloomington. She worked in Denver and Brownsville before moving with her son to Boulder County in 2009. She talks about racism in Colorado, which she finds to be more pervasive than in Texas. She also discusses her work at The Community Foundation, where she manages grants that are used to encourage and promote philanthropy. She trains and facilitates workshops on leadership development, diversity, cultural competency, volunteer management and strategic planning. She offers career advice for young people.

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

[A].

00:00

(Today is August 14, 2013. My name is Margaret Alfonso, and I am interviewing Elvira Ramos who lives in Longmont, Colorado, and is [Director of Programs at The Community Foundation Serving Boulder]. This interview is being recorded for the Boulder County Latino History Project and the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. Jason Romero is the videographer for this oral history. [Although the interview was videotaped, the narrator requested that it only be made available in audio form.] Elvira, thank for sharing your life and your profession with us. We appreciate you taking the time out to help the history project. So can you tell me your full name and where you were born?)

My name is Elvira Ramos, and I was born in East Chicago, Indiana.

(And what are your parent's names and where were they born?)

My father is—was—Jesus Guadalupe Ramos and my mother was Maria [Maria Rosa] Ramirez, and they were both born in Brownsville, Texas.

(How many children did your parents have?)

Three, I am the eldest of three.

(Okay. And where do your brothers and sisters live?)

My sister is in California, and my brother is back in the Chicago area.

(Okay, very good. What is your education?)

I have a bachelor's in Literature from Indiana University.

(In literature?)

We didn't have Chicano literature in those days, so I studied the romantic poets from England.

(So which was the first generation in your family to arrive in the U.S.?)

We have no idea. One of those families—or, my dad said that: We never moved, the border moved; the river moved. You know that saga; you've heard that from other people. We've always been from the valley, the South Texas Rio Grand Valley. That has been a part of a number of different countries including Texas.

(What took your family to Illinois?)

Post World War II, my father was—they were recruiting in the steel mills, and it wasn't just in Gary, but it was in a lot of the heavy industry in the North. After World War II they were pretty [active] down in the South so they recruited a lot of African American people and Latinos and a lot of veterans. My father had a sixth-grade education, and so this was a perfect opportunity, post war, for him and he did well. I mean he did okay. It was hard work, but he worked in the steel mills for 35 years.

(And how did he meet your mother?)

You know, I don't think I ever heard that story. Brownsville was not very big, and they all knew each other and they all knew the same kind of people. So I think there was sort of a connection that was just inevitable.

(So they both moved north together?)

They did—oh yes, it was after they got married. They got married in Brownsville and then moved north and then I came along.

(Can you tell me a little bit about your father? About what he was like as a person?)

I can tell you a little bit about his history.

(Okay.)

I am a very proud of both of them, really. My father was orphaned young. His mother died when he was twelve. His granddad was around for a little while, but he—the story was, and I've seen the place, I know it is true—he grew up in a two-room dirt-floor shack. He slept in one room,

and the cow slept in the other. And he was on his own. He quit school at 12 when his mother died and just kind of was a vagabond, working odd jobs down in the Valley.

Then he entered World War II, and that really changed his life. He worked very hard on his English then, because he was based in England—he saw the world. So everything changed for him. I was going to college before I was born. There was no question in his mind that his children were all going to college. So here is this man with a sixth grade education, orphaned, dirt-poor, but every one of his children went to college.

(What did your siblings study?)

My sister studied art and art history and my brother radio and television.

(Interesting. All right. Now tell me about your mother.)

04:40

My mother was—both my parents are gone now. My mother was very lively and funny, and she got her high school diploma, wanted very much to go to college at a time when girls did not go to college from good Mexican families. So she was not permitted to go to college, and it was a heartbreak for her, which made her even more supportive of my going away to school. Both of them—super bright, funny, engaging people.

She did not work outside to home very much, just occasionally. She was one of those moms that would get up at three in the morning and make tortillas and pack your lunch, and I don't know how she did it all, but she did. And then she volunteered in her spare time—"spare" in quotes—with the Democratic Party and for the school and for the blah, blah, blah, blah. You know, church—

(So, talk about some of those values that you learned at home besides the value of education and—)

—Absolutely that. And I think caring for people and being involved in civic life. My father's father had left the family very young, which is why my dad was alone. But his family, the Ramos', they were very involved in politics in the Valley, very involved in the Democratic Party. My dad was involved when we lived up in Gary. So they were very engaged in the community. My mother baked cakes for the school. There was just no question they were going to do everything they could.

They were also, I think, pretty open people. I grew up in a—I tell people I was really blessed, because I grew up in a very multicultural neighborhood. It was post World War II—heavy, hard industry. A Scottish family here and a Latino family here, and an Italian family here, a family off the reservation here, a family from Appalachia over here—so our block was wonderfully mixed people. We used to joke that we could cuss in twelve different languages by the time we were seven, because all of our friends' parents spoke another language. It is very different from the experience that a lot of people had.

(So speaking of language, did you speak Spanish at home?)

No, I did not. My parents spoke Spanish, but they did not want us to speak Spanish. They were punished as a lot of kids are. Even today they are punished for speaking Spanish. They were held back in school. They were embarrassed, despite the fact that Brownsville is very heavy Latino. They nonetheless were punished, and they did not want that for us. So none of us spoke Spanish at home.

(So when you were growing up, did you in fact see other Spanish-speaking students be punished for their language? Was that something that you actually saw?)

Not for us [?]. Because it was different then what you see here. And for us, most of us were first and second generation from different cultures, if you will, and none of my friends spoke their families' language. Their family may have come from Romania, but they didn't speak Romanian, even though they may have been first generation Americans. So we were very much going to assimilate to be successful and make it in the USA. That was the value.

(Is there anything else that stands out in terms of what you learned at home that has kind of carried through to your adulthood as well?)

Working very, very hard. I am a very hard worker. I get very restless when I am not doing something, and I know I got that from both of my parents. My mother getting up early to make tortillas, staying up late to keep everything clean and make sure that everyone is in bed. My father working in the steel mills, and on his days off he would get up and do something. He built things. He would build houses for people, and they built an apartment in our basement so that people from Mexico could come and live with us. And my dad would get them a job in the [mills], and get them settled, and get them involved in the church. It was about caring for your community and never stop working.

(So it sounds like in terms of your education—did you go as far as—did you study everything you wanted to study?)

No, not by any means. I would still be in school if I could afford it.

(What would you study?)

I think I'd study literature again. I love it, yeah.

(Do you remember any—aside from what you just shared about the language and students being, in the past, punished for their language, do you remember any other anti-Mexican events or attitudes while you were growing up?)

09:49

Oh yeah.

(Yeah? Can you mention a few of those?)

Yeah, and it was kind odd, especially as I said in a community that was not white and brown, or black and white—was just very mixed. There was a lot of—I remember hearing, "Yeah, you are

Mexican, but you are different.” And “You are different in that you are clean, you are smart, you are polite.” You know, like no Mexican ever was, right?

When I was little, I remembered that when we would play house, I was always the maid. That was one of those micro-aggressions that you learn very young, right? My brother’s name is Jesus. You can imagine how he suffered at the hands of some of our Anglo teachers who could not understand how to pronounce his name. So there were those little-bitty kinds of not so subtle messages that if you worked harder and tried harder and you were cleaner and you were smarter and you are everything, then you could make it.

(Okay. Let’s go to Boulder County. When and why and what brought you to Boulder County?)

This job brought me to Boulder County.

(Can you describe a little bit about your job?)

Yeah, sure I have a great job. I, as the program director, I am the person who manages all of our grants’ processing. So we give our about five million dollars in grants every year and a million of that is competitive grants. Competitive grants—we have lots of volunteers who come in and read proposals and make decisions. I also co-manage our leadership programs, so I get to be involved and engaged in a lot of what is going on for Boulder County leadership and things like that. So I am very lucky. I have a great job. People building.

(And how do you like living in Boulder County?)

It is okay.

(How long have you been here?)

I’ve been here almost four years now. We moved here in ‘09. So November 2<sup>nd</sup> will be four years exactly. But we drove our from Brownsville, Texas, where it was tropical, into one of the worst snow storms Boulder County had had in a long time. Even though I had a four-wheel drive I had forgotten how to use it, and it was just snow on the ground, and I was thinking, “Why did I do this?” [Laughs]

([Laughs] Welcome to Colorado.)

Yeah, welcome back.

([Laughs] So tell me, besides the snow how was life different for you here than in Texas?)

Markedly different, I mean I spent a lot of time in Indiana and then in Denver. I lived in Denver for decades. Then moved to Texas. My father was very sick, so I went down to help him out, and then came here, and so back to Colorado. I forgot—having been in Brownsville where the population majority is Latino, and even the Anglo people speak Spanish, and the culture is dominantly Latino, and then coming to Boulder County was really shocking for me. I had forgotten what Colorado was like and then felt pretty uncomfortable and sometimes still do. I don’t let those kinds of things stop me, but it was markedly different.

I told many people the story of when we first moved here. And my son, who in Brownsville knew all—the former mayor, the current mayor, the future mayor, the Sheriff. And all of these folks were all Mexican American, Chicano, Latino people. And then we come here, and my son says to me, “How come the only Latinos I see are the bus boys?” That just hit me really hard—how much more work we have to do here.

(On a lot of different levels.)

On a lot of different levels.

(Have you felt accepted here in terms of your work?)

Yeah.

(Has that affected your work at all?)

It’s just made me work harder, because I am going to see how long we stay here. I want my son to be comfortable. I want him to be in a community that embraces people like him and like Jason and, you know, who look like me. That doesn’t happen all the time here. I do miss Texas. I miss the beach. But I miss Gary, Indiana, which fronts on beach too. So I kind of miss water—we are pretty landlocked here.

(Tell me a little bit about your son. What kinds of values have you passed on to your son?)

14:48

Well, I can tell you what I hope I’ve passed on. [Laughs] He is almost eighteen, so I am not sure all the time. I hope that he has learned—I am told he has from other people who don’t know him well, that his kindness and his good heart really shine, and that is really important to me. That he demonstrates what a loving person he is.

(How old is your son?)

He is eighteen.

(And living at home?)

Yeah, he is still going through high school.

(Okay.)

I wish he would learn Spanish, but he doesn’t feel comfortable, and because he learned English first that is hard for him.

(What do you think he is interested in, in terms of his own career, his own path?)

I am not sure from one day to the next. He is not one of those people that he has identified that early. I envy that in other people, but one day he wants to be a rap music star, though he knows

that is unrealistic. He really likes cooking. He has been working part time in the food industry while he is still in school, so maybe a chef. He loves creating food things. He is very creative.

(Beautiful. Okay so maybe we can talk a little bit about—and maybe this is a little redundant, but it has a little different angle, so if—)

—I think it is going to be edited anyway.

[Editorial Note: Our practice is to NOT edit/revise the original oral history. After the interview, this was explained to the narrator.]

(Yeah, oh yeah, it will be. So if someone asked you to describe your ethnicity, you've talked a little bit about it, what words would you use? Some people would define themselves as Chicano, some were saying Latino, some were saying Hispanic, some were saying—you know.)

Latina. I think truthfully what I tell people is, "I am a Texican once removed." Okay. So my family, my culture really is in South Texas, but I was raised in Indiana where there is a very strong community of people from South Texas.

(Oh.)

So my parents belonged to this whole social group of Latinos from Texas. So, you know, there is that culture still there. And I've been looking at \_\_\_\_\_ Texans once removed here too.

([Laughs] Very good. So tell me of other people besides your parents that were influential in your life.)

The neighbors. It was a close neighborhood. The families kept an eye on each other—I remember that. Most \_\_\_\_\_, I think. But we were lucky enough to grow up in a time where we could play in the streets and other parents would watch out for us, and I really learned a lot from that. I had some teachers who were very caring and very supportive and very encouraging.

(How about in some of your work settings?)

There have always been people that I've worked with that have helped me a lot. Truly. We don't do this any less alone. I am really privileged to be working with someone like Josie [Heath] who is—she really walks her talk.

(So it sounds like that helped you pretty much learn what you needed to learn as well along the way to get to your position today.)

I think I have—I don't really identify it too often or think about it very often, but I know I have the drive that my parents have—to get up early and work hard and if things aren't working then just keep moving and keep growing. Don't stop.

(So tell me something else that you are passionate about.)

Oh gee. I don't know.

[Laughs]

This one is going to be edited right? [Laughs]

(Yeah. [Laughs] We won't get into too many personal things either. I guess something that just keeps you going. It can be work related or you know anything different perhaps that you've shared so far.)

I don't know how not to work. I don't know. I mean, I don't know how to slow down—it's not in my nature, and I am real passionate about people—like Jason—having some opportunities here that they deserve, rightfully deserve. I work as many hours as I work—that is one of the biggest reasons is I want people to get—and people who don't often get it—what a treasure what we have in this community. The young people, the young Latino people, and the brilliance, and the values, and I want them to grow up [?] and get it. In my work that is definitely one of my passions.

It is hard to think of the teacher that made the difference. I know later I'll get home [?] and go: Why didn't I think of that? But none of us really are alone, and I know that.

20:40

(So tell me what advice do you have for those starting their career? Whether it is an interest in a similar work that you do now in your career or just generally speaking.)

I think, don't hold back, and go where you are not invited. Just step right in and introduce yourself. Remember the manners that your family taught you and the class that your parents obviously gave you and remember that as you project yourself, but don't be afraid to stick your nose in when you are not invited. Really. Show people how valuable you are to them. Make them get that.

Depend on those who come before you to help open those doors, because I think we all want to do that. And we are all as Carmen and I joke all the time, "We are getting tired." So we really want to open doors for other folks, so if I say to you, "I really want you to come to this meeting with me, because I really want you to meet some people, and I think it will be good for you. Even if it doesn't seem real clear at the moment what that is going to do for you, please trust me. Do it. It will open your world, even if it is not in education. I am not going to introduce you to the principal of the school. It is something that is going to open your world up." I think that is what we need to do is make this our whole world. Not just sit in a little place in a corner where\_\_\_\_\_.

(So tell me if something else occurs to you in terms of that kind of advice that you give a young person who is midway in their career and wants an extra push and keep going and hasn't tired out yet. Just interject that if something else comes to your mind.)

Okay.

(Now this is going to be a discrimination question.)

Okay.



(So I don't think that I am going to be transcribed directly my question so much as it is going to be your answer. So do you feel comfortable talking about like experiencing discrimination yourself because of your background? Maybe to be specific—well, not so much just in Boulder County, but what are some of those other—we talked about as a child that you played the role of a maid and that kind of thing. But as an adult what were some significant—*were* there some significant instances, events, where you felt discriminated against? Then how did you over come that?)

I kept framing this discrimination in my mind where I think of some of these experiences, but let me translate it into something I think might fit. When I went away to college, I was the first girl in my family to go to college, and everyone was terrified for me. I went to a campus of about 30,000 students, and there were less than 100 Latinos on campus. It was lonesome, and I remember that. The only other Latina that I knew, her family was from Cuba, they were refugees, and they were extremely wealthy, and she and I were from different worlds. So I cried, and I cried, missing my family, because these people were so different from me. They were all very nice to me but they were so different. I just didn't get them nor did they get me \_\_\_\_\_. Eventually more students came, and I worked with some volunteer work to get some more Latino students.

One summer, it sticks out on my mind. I stayed in Bloomington, Indiana, which is southern Indiana—big, big university, but in a small town. I worked one summer in a—and this in not going to be discrimination, but I did it. One time I worked in a factory where I made—because I worked three jobs at a time constantly to put myself through school and did summers, nights, weekends and everything. And that is another thing for advice. Don't say to yourself, "I don't have the money. I can't do this." Just don't let that stop you. You can do it. You just have to work harder.

So there I am in southern Indiana—I am working in this factory where we are on a line, and I am putting together color TVs, so I can earn some money to go back to school. It is me and all these very, very working-class, southern white folks. And they were so kind to me. Never did I feel discriminated by any of these people. They were so good. I didn't get it when I came to Colorado. And then I saw the racism in Colorado. I kept thinking back to those people in these factories in southern Indiana. They were far less educated than the average Coloradoan, certainly in Denver or Boulder, who were fairly poor and were just the most hospitable, kind, generous people. They opened their homes and their hearts to me.

Then, I came to Colorado, and I can see what is happening here, and it's pretty uncomfortable. It was a very different experience. Colorado is a place, I think—and I mean this with all due respect, because I have lived here for many, many years—it thinks that it is more progressive than it really is. There is kind of this myth that people who live here have about living here, about opportunities, and it's sort of like a "Go West, young man" mentality, but in fact, there aren't a lot of opportunities here unless you really fight for them. There is so much discrimination here.

26:43

(When you say here, are you talking about just Colorado or the different places that you've been, or specifically in Boulder County that you've seen it?)

Both, yeah. I have seen it in both places. Yeah.

(Okay.)

I just remembered I had a meeting this morning, and I kind of went off on this \_\_\_\_\_ woman. [Laughs] About the R word. She works very hard on social justice issues. People don't want to identify what happens as racism, because we so want to believe that, that is not us. Any of us. But in fact in order to really change everything you really have to look at what is behind—what really is behind that power and privilege. What is behind those micro-aggressions?

(Tell me, in your job, because you've taught leadership and many things that are related to the kind of subject that we are talking about. What are you doing in your job? Is your job helping you make an influence on making people more aware of these issues? Of the big R, the race word?)

I think so. I hope so. One of the things that—one of the programs that we have here is a Leadership Fellows program. We completed four years. We are going into this fifth year. We've formed a merger with Leadership Boulder for the next year. Our intent is to create emerging, multicultural, inclusive leaders. So we are looking at our transformational leadership model where we are trying to change people.

(Okay. Continue if you'd like to say more about that.)

Yes, so in my work, I am really lucky that I have the opportunity to take some of those things that I've seen that make me less than happy and to try to turn them over a little bit and to—that will be a positive direction for a lot of folks. In our Leadership Fellow class we talk about inclusive leadership, and by that—it is not just race and ethnicity and age. It is also top-down sharing power, sharing ideas—be more creative as a whole and what that can do for Boulder County. And then I am just \_\_\_\_\_ groups that I'm working on. We are really looking at: How do we create, I don't know, an inventory, a database of leadership opportunities where people from high school on can learn what kind of places can you go. If you join one of the grants committees for example, which is a leadership opportunity, you will be making the decision along with your cohort about grants that could be \$30 [thousand] \$40,000 dollars. So you will learn how to read budgets. You will learn how to read proposals. You will be sitting elbow-to-elbow with people who may be very different from you. So I am really trying to get my arms around how many other kind of opportunities are there, and how do we get people connected? How do you find out about what is out there?

30:01

(Part of the issue is, not knowing how to get involved.)

Absolutely.

(It's a big step.)

And not knowing who to talk to about it, which is why I say, “Don’t you quit if you don’t know anybody, just go anyway.” The worst thing that will happen is they will kick you out, and it’s so what. [Chuckles]

([Chuckles] Okay, you shared really in quite detail about this mission and job that you are doing now really, and that is your passion.)

I am lucky I am very, very lucky. I know that.

(Is there anything else that you would like to share with us to really be able to document that would be beneficial for someone who may be reading about the work that you do now and might want to continue—might want to engage in this type of career and impact that you are having in the community?)

I would like it very much, and I think that we are—Latinos—there is a lot of—we create our own stereotypes around ourselves. And what kind of food we all like. Right? But we are, many of us value community and generosity and caring about each other—our families. So I would love to see people take that to the next level where it has some influence and wraps the civic life of our community and philanthropy. There are not enough Latinos in philanthropy, people raising money to benefit our communities wherever they may be.

I would really like to see more young people, young Latinos learn about philanthropy as a career—what it takes. We send—our communities send millions of dollars to South [America], Central America, Mexico—millions in Western Union statistics—how much money get wired—and we haven’t built enough of a sense of community here. Some of that money could stay here to help our own communities here where we live.

(How can we reach out to that community?)

I am working on it. I haven’t figured it out yet.

(Okay, we are all wanting to do that.)

I am depending on people like you to tell me.

(Yeah.)

I think we want to do that. I think we all want to do that.

(Okay, so would you like to share any cute family story with us? Any kind of family story with us or any more in terms of your career and—?)

You know, we were talking. We have a new staff member named Esteban [?], and he is in his twenties, and he brought some tamales in the other day. And we called him the Underground Tamale Network. This is his dad’s secretary’s mother—blah, blah, somebody, somebody—and they make wonderful tamales. But we got into this wonderful, long conversation about our families, around making tamales, and what treasured memories those are. And so we have—many of us have those kind of shared links. We just have to find them.

(Okay. Jason do you have any questions?)

[Jason:] (A little bit earlier you were talking about when you were growing up. You mentioned the church quite a few times. So can you maybe talk a little bit about the role of the church in your family?)

Big, very important role—it's not just that my family was religious, and [sound of static] we \_\_\_\_\_ to be religious. It's that it was an event. Going to church was an event. Going to church was a neighborhood community event, not just a religious event. Getting your first communion in that special dress was an event. So that kind of embedded in the community is how the church was. You didn't just go to church and pray, but it was an event. Everything was a part of the community—and the potlucks at the church, and the fish fries.

(Anymore? We want to thank you for sharing with us.)

Thank you very much for asking me.

(This is a wonderful time to share it with you.)

35:01 [End of interview.]