

La Frontera Speaks PODCAST Episode 1 – Dr. Yolanda Leyva

ST: Hello and welcome to our podcast “La Frontera Speaks”, I’m Siera Tanabe,

JH: and I’m Jonathan Hinojos.

ST: Today we have UTEP’s very own Director of the Institute of Oral History, Dr. Yolanda Leyva.

JH: Can you tell us a little bit about your background, and what motivated you to become the Director of UTEP’s Institute of Oral History?

YL: First let me say that I’m really happy to be here with you, thank you for the invitation to share some of my story with our listeners. I did my first oral history when I was 20 years old, and I was at UT Austin. I was a business major and management, and the only way that I kept saying, because I’m not really a business kinda person, is by taking Mexican American studies courses.

So, I took a course one day and the assignment was to do an oral history, so I did two. And it was such an exciting thing for me, I did oral histories with my parents, the oral histories got deposited at the UT Austin library. And I thought, “this is a fantastic thing to do!”. Then I became a social worker and didn’t continue doing oral histories until I was 30 and decided I was going to become a historian, and that love of oral histories, that love of documenting people’s stories that are often unheard, that we don’t read in government reports, that we don’t see in newspaper. It all came back to me and I started to do oral histories again, and here I am 30 years later having the honor of being the director of the Institute of Oral History here at UTEP and you know I go back and I read the introduction I wrote when I was 21, about oral histories, and I still believe every single thing I wrote 42 years ago.

ST: So today I wanna kickstart our podcast by talking about oral history and why we keep track of our history is especially important because of where we are in the border. Now, I know for Jonathan and myself, we were kinda musing about what oral history really means and what exactly does encompass and how we even begin to quantify oral history as a whole? For those who don’t really know what oral history means; it is essentially the collection of historical information from interviews, and recordings of people speaking about personal events and memories. Most oral history accounts don’t show up in textbooks, so we’ve had the privilege of seeing a small portion of the work that you’ve done for the Institute of Oral History, and I’m curious to hear your take on the importance of oral history today, and what that means for us living on the border.

YL: I think oral history is so important to documenting stories that otherwise might be lost or perhaps just kept within families. The Institute of Oral History has about 1000 oral histories that have been collected, even before we started, they go back to the 1960’s

and the Institute itself was founded in 1972, so you'll find in our collection oral histories of people who are well known, people who are not well known. You'll find oral histories of Braceros, we have hundreds of oral histories with men who came to the United States as temporary workers, mostly in agriculture. So, we have this, this variety of oral histories and we are very well known amongst scholars and Mexican American history and border history because they know they can get those stories. When I think about the importance of oral history, I think of it on a couple of levels; one is so that when scholars go to study something like la frontera, they're going to understand the full range of the stories from the very personal stories that we have on the collection to the stories that told through government studies. So, that's important, to provide that context for people. But to me there's another part of oral history that is just as important, and that is that oral history can be very healing for people, it can give people a sense of validation, it can give people a sense of belonging. I'm never gonna forget a few years ago when I interviewed a former Bracero, almost 90 years old and we did this great oral history, I barely had to ask anything, he was a fantastic story teller and then we ended the oral history and people were putting away the equipment and I was still sitting with him and he looked at me with tears in his eyes and he said "now I can die, because someone has listened to my story" and fortunately, two years later he is still with us, he's heading towards 91. But that really stuck with me, you know, people I think have a...all people have a need to be listened to, have a need to tell their story and I think the vast majority of us don't have that opportunity. To give you another example, in the 90's when I was teaching at UT San Antonio, I had my undergraduates interview, as an oral history, someone in their family, and one student came and said "I really wanna interview my grandmother but she keeps saying no, that she's not done anything, that she's not important" and I said "well, just keep trying, tell her that her story is important to you, her granddaughter". So, when they did their presentations in class, the student came with a big, beautiful portrait of her grandmother, and she told us "my grandmother has never had a portrait photograph taken, but she did it this time just for this presentation, because she was so proud that she told her story and she said that no one ever in her life had ever asked her anything about herself". So, to me on that level, oral histories can be real powerful for, for individuals and for their families.

JH: And, I just have to ask about the exhibits you've been working on since. I and many people working on this podcast, have been able to see the impact that the Museo Urbano and the Uncaged Art exhibit have had here at UTEP and along the border. What inspired these projects? What influenced you to co found the Museo Urbano?

YL: So, Museo Urbano started as a very grassroots project, we used to sell enchilada plates, to fund our exhibits, very grassroots. And it started back in 2006, it was based on a concept that some scholars in Juarez had earlier in the 2000's. So, in 2006 the city was planning to demolish El Segundo barrio here in El Paso, which is one of the most historic Mexican immigrant neighborhoods in the whole US, and I was part of a group that was fighting to preserve the barrio. And people who lived there kept asking us "what's so important about this barrio that you are so involved in saving it?" and we would say "well

of course you, the people who live here, 'cuz you know you'll be displaced. Where will you go?" But also, we're historians so the history is important. So, people were like "what is the history of this barrio?" So, we began to put historic photographs on banners and put them on buildings, and that was the first Museo Urbano that we sold the enchilada plates for, in 2009 though the help of one of my colleagues here, Dr. Paul Edison who was chair of the department, he was able to write a grant with Dr. David Romo to fund Museo Urbano on the eve of the centennial of the Mexican Revolution. So, we created a small community museum in El Segundo barrio, we rented a pretty tiny tenement apartment and set up a museum that ended up getting an award from the National Council on Public History as an outstanding project. But we always really thought of ourselves as a museum of the streets, since that's how we started out on the walls of buildings. So, we still do street exhibits, but we also work with museums, we work with the history museum of the city, the archeology museum. We've worked quite often with the Centennial museum here at UTEP, and the Uncaged Art exhibit that ran from April to December of 2019 is a good example of the work that we do. We had the huge fortune of acquiring almost 30 pieces of work created by children that were detained at the Tornillo detention camp, these were kids who had been separated from their families under the federal policy, or who...especially the kids or the older teenagers, had crossed the border by themselves. They, within the space of four days created 400 pieces of art, out of those 400 pieces, 370 were thrown away, and 30 were saved.

In January of 2019 I got a call from father Rafael Garcia of Sacred Heart in El Segundo barrio, and he said "there's this amazing art here at Tornillo" he was there giving mass, he was one of the few people, other than staff, who were actually allowed into the detention center, and he says "Yolanda, do you want this artwork?" and I said "Museo Urbano would love the artwork".

And I didn't even know what I was saying yes to, I imagined maybe some drawings, I had no clue. But when they delivered it, it was mannequins, it was 3D creations of soccer fields and churches, and then pretty amazing and beautiful paintings. So, we wanted to show it right away because Tornillo had just closed, it was in the news a lot. And we thought we have to show it quickly or it's not gonna be timely anymore. The very sad thing is that it lasted the whole year and it continued to be timely, because right now there is about 60,000 children who have asked for asylum who are in detention centers. And there's a new one being built on the far East side of El Paso right now by a for profit prison company. So, it ended up still being timely, we created a photographic exhibit that has travelled across the United States, it's been in Hawaii, it's been in New England, it's been in Washington state, it's been everywhere! And we're looking for ways to travel the original art work to.

ST: And I know you mentioned this earlier, what can you tell us about the Bracero program? And how the program gives us insight into the borderline and Chicano history.

YL: The Bracero program really had a huge influence on the United States as a whole. It started during World War II when US agriculture employers began to say "all the men are off in the military, we need people to work in the fields". So, the United States and Mexico

both contracted with each other that men would come, usually for six months, and they could renew their contracts, they worked mostly in agriculture, although they also worked in railroads and some industries. And there were millions of contracts given out, so that's not millions of men but it's millions of contracts. And it lasted until 1964. So, we don't really know how many Braceros ended up returning and becoming citizens, but we know that there are millions of descendants of those men in the United States today. I've had experiences where I'm teaching class, and I walk about the Bracero program and the class has heard of it, and then someone would come back the next day and say "I was telling my parents what you thought us and my grandpa was a Bracero and I didn't know it" so, the history is a lot, a lot closer than we, than we know. The Braceros who came were hired because they were one, men who had agricultural experience, they did tests, like they looked at their hands to see if their hands were callused, if their hands looked worn that was a good sign for them.

So, we did an oral history with one man who was a farm worker in Mexico but his hand never got callused, they were like baby smooth hands, and when I interviewed him he showed me his hands. And, it's true, he had like beautiful soft hands. So, he said that he was really scared they weren't gonna hire him. So, he said he spent the whole night rubbing his hands on this jagged pipe that was where he was sleeping, to try to like hurt them, so that they would know that he was a working man.

So, we've done, like I said, hundreds of interviews with former Braceros, it was part of a, a project about ten years ago, but in 2016 we were coming up to the 75th anniversary of the Bracero program, and the first Braceros came here through El Paso, although the Mexican government didn't let them stay in Texas, 'cuz Texas was so racists against Mexicans, but they crossed here. So, we were thinking; here's the 75 years since it's started, we were working with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, because El Paso specifically the town of Socorro, also has the last remaining Bracero processing center, everything else has been demolished. So, we were working with them to create a conference and someday, family started to come to me and say "my grandfather, my father, my uncle was a Bracero, would you like to interview him?" So, suddenly out of the blew I'm interviewing Braceros. And, like I say they're late 80s early 90s, because it ended in 64, so I don't know how much...I'm not a mathematician I can't think of how many years has been but that's been a while. And just their, their stories are really amazing, they talk a lot about suffering. They talk about being brought from Mexico in, on trains but in cattle cars where they have to stand the whole trip, and there's no bathrooms and they were getting sick from the movement of the train. Then they come here and they're sent out to different places. Some employers were wonderful, some employers were terrible. I've seen the check stubs of some Braceros where by the time the employer took out rent and food, they were being paid a penny for their weeks work. So, there's a lot of suffering, and even the processing, they were sprayed in the face with DDT, and I didn't know 'til I did one oral history that it wasn't just on their faces where they were being sprayed with DDT, but also on their genitals. And they talk about how humiliating that was, one to be naked in front of everybody and then to have that done. So, they all talk about suffering, but to me the other part is they frequently end with the very same sentiment, which is "I would've done anything, I would've suffered anything for my family and thank god I'm

here in the United States and my family has opportunities, because of what I did, even though it was difficult and I suffered". They say that a lot at the end of their interviews. And, you know, these oral histories are not just documenting the story for researchers, but I've seen how proud the families are too, that their dad or their abuelito's story is documented now. You know, and we preserve the stories forever. When technology changes, like when we went from cassettes to digital, then we had to digitize all the 2000 interviews, so, we do everything we can to preserve them indefinitely and, and that means a lot to the children and the grandchildren. It's been a very fulfilling project the Bracero interviews, and it's also been very heartbreaking at times. But I guess that's people's lives right? We all have both in our lives.

JH: And, since we are working on developing our own oral histories, what do you hope to achieve with these podcasts?

YL: So, one of the things that has always been important to me for the Institute is not just that we are gathering stories but then they go out in some way. And like I said we're super well known among researchers, they know to come. We're less well known to the general public, so to me these podcasts are a way to get stories out, not just to people in El Paso but anyone who cares to listen right? Anyone who has the internet. Because I think the stories of the border are so fascinating and so important in this time period especially when the border is in the news so much, but it's usually in super negative ways. Where migration is in the news so much, but migrants are portrayed really negatively. I wish that everybody could see the border, I'm gonna say the way that I do. They think that...that's not what I'm trying to say. But I wish that everybody could see the border in its fullness, I think so many of us in the border do that. You know, yes there's poverty, yes there's suffering, people can be very desperate crossing into the United States. But also, the creativity of people, and, and just the, the way that people love their families, and like the Braceros would do anything for their families. I see that among the asylum seekers that we've been doing oral histories with. And they've been mostly women, and they just talk about "we're suffering for our children, because we want them to live". It's not even a matter of opportunity for them, is like "we don't want them to be killed".

JH: And, do you plan on continuing recording podcasts?

YL: So that's the, that's the vision to keep recording podcasts. I've been in conversations with one of our affiliated faculty, Dr. Meredith Abarca, and she is very excited about doing podcasts the next academic year, based on her specialty: food, and the meaning of food.

ST: So, I'm just gonna quickly add that these podcasts are really fun, and it's fun to see and hear from people from all different backgrounds and all different areas of study and expertise come in and talk about a similar issue. Alright, I think that wraps our interview for today. Dr. Leyva, do you have any last-minute advice or musings for our listeners who are passionate about life on the border and want to give back to their own borderline communities.

YL: What I would say to our listeners in general, wherever you may be, whatever town, country you may be in is that if you have elders in your family or in your community , among your neighbors, take the time to listen to their stories, and if you can record them with whatever technology you have, your phone, a recorder, a computer, to please take the time to do that. Because, you know there's that saying that every time somebody dies, a library is lost. So, there's so...I just wish everybody's story in the whole world can be preserved. Because I think we are all different and we have something to teach others. So, I would say that in general. For those on the border there's always so much need on the border, that if you can spare an hour a month, there will be some place that will welcome your help.

J: Thank you so much again for being here and talking with us today.

YL: Thank you both!

ST: This podcast is a project of the Institute of Oral History,
JH: and its sponsored by the EPCC UTEP's Humanities Collaborative, funded by the Mellon grant foundation.

End of Podcast