

**Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County,
Illinois**

Eleidys Guerra Oral History Interview

Stephanie Christian, Interviewer

November 20, 2017

SIUE

Stephanie Christian (SC): Eleidys, please, where is your native place?

Eleidys Guerra (EG): Hello, Stephanie. Good morning, everyone. Ok, I am from Venezuela. I was born in the city of Puerto Ordaz, in the state of Bolívar. It is in the center, about the middle of the county, and ok, it is a city that has many productive areas, many areas of production, one that produces aluminum, eh bauxite, there is also gold, in, in, in the city. There is coal in another as such. Even though it is not the largest city in the country, it is large enough with 960,000 inhabitants.

SC: Tell me about your family and your childhood.

EG: Well. My family is a little, sometimes complicated because one might use family to mean siblings, parents and that's it, but when I refer to my whole family, aunts, uncles and cousins. They were a considerably large family. On my mother's side, I have ten aunts and uncles, y on my father's side I have fourteen aunts and uncles. I have lost count how many cousins I have. I don't know if I have more than seventy, eighty cousins that I count. I believe It's enough. It is a family very united for both sides that loves very much to share. They are always looking for ways to get together in the grandparents' house in this case, in my case. They are always looking how to be, how to share, how to always maintain as a united family. Any so many of both sides of my mother and my father are very happy people. The truth is, to have been in this environment was wonderful. I didn't hide them. I was sent the perfect family.

SC: Tell me about your first memory in school.

EG: Look, my first memory in school was horrible. I remember that I didn't even want the first grade. We would use a parte that was in front of the school. It was where they taught how to interact with other children. It is the time period of preschool. I was not at home, I was not with my mother, I was not with my father. For me it was...I remember I cried a lot. I cried so much that my mother was nervous to leave me in the school. When I got out, I stayed close to the car. Because my screams where too much that my mother was waiting in the street. When I consider the first week, I would vomit because I was so nervous of other people in particular my teacher. She was very big with frizzy hair and spoke very sternly. After a week, I changed teachers and I

was much more calm. That take off from home was a bit complicated. I believe the majority of children in this process feel a hard kick.

SC: Tell me about a typical day in high school.

EG: Ok, a typical memory, uh...ok. Generally, we always did a folklore activity, something allegorical that represented the country. We had an opportunity to participate in a certain kind of dance called "joropo". It's a type of, of, of dance, of music typical in my country. It was truly enjoyable because my family tells about an aunt and uncle who work in the cultural environment, including aunt who is a dance teacher. Really, for me, when I hear any type of folklore music, also non-folklore music, but especially folklore something really moves me, in other words, to enjoy myself, really enjoy myself, to enjoy myself enough.

SC: How was the neighborhood where you grew up?

EG: Look, uh, I believe there are few places like where I grew up because it was a, a very united community. In fact, the families would say hello to each other and see to the needs of everyone. We lived near my maternal grandparents' house and always at four or five in the afternoon after we finished class and homework, all the kids were close in age and would go out to play in the street, a game called "kick ball". I don't know if here, I believe there are some places here that practice it. We always had an activity or something to do between the kids. It was a place safe for everyone, it provided a net for children's growth.

SC: What did you do after you finished school?

EG: Look, after I finished school I considered that I was practically finished, because there was not a, a, a period to say, ah, I was without, uh, two months or three months without, without any activity. When, when I finished high school as such, I was about six months for what in my country, uh, I think it's similar here, uh, we present when we finish [sweeping sound], or when we are fifteen, we provide test that it's called the Academic Test of [inaudible], depending what percentage you got along with your grades you could choose what you wanted to study at the university. I aimed to go to public university, and thanks to god I was able to study binding arbitration in the public university in Venezuela. I practically took vacation for four months to prepare for the next level, another stage the was the processes of university as such.

SC: Tell me about your family that you have here.

EG: Good, the family that I have here, I have a little angel of nine years. He is a little restless but an angel in the end. He is studying fourth grade in elem, in elementary school in [inaudible]. He is at the same level as me in his process [inaudible] obviously, he doesn't have the language either. It's a learning process that he not only has to learn in his grade [inaudible], mathematics, science, history, geography, he has a little more work because he has to learn in English and after he learns it, he has to understand everything they are explaining to him. So, it is a tough process.

And my husband works in the university. He forms part of the team of professors in the engineering department. There is a mix of cultures because my husband is Brazilian, I am Venezuelan, my son is Venezuelan, so sometimes it is also a little complicated though he speaks Spanish very well, he speaks five languages, and sometimes he doesn't speak to us in Spanish but we understand. When, ok, he gives me an explanation in Portuguese, "no, no, no, in Spanish". But, good, it's a little [inaudible] here, a family, but a normal thing. [inaudible] he helps me learn, even in other words, he corrects me, I learn Portuguese, he finished learning Spanish. This is what happens.

SC: Tell me about your first day at the University of Southern Illinois Edwardsville.

EG: Look, my first day was a little funny because I was worried that if I don't speak any English, I don't understand any English, how is it going to be explained because the first day is to get to know the university, the security conditions, the class schedule. I had to see if there was a person who spoke Spanish that could explain it to me because if it was told to me in English, obviously, I would not understand. So, really, this is what happened. So, then, a list of questions without answers because obviously they were explaining a lot and the classmates already speak some English, they are perfecting it at this point. I believe I was one of the only ones who did not understand anything, absolutely nothing. So then, I stayed with blank questions. When the semester has passed, I will understand and have my questions answered, the other card is that I would have to go to my husband to ask him, because I don't know how these things work. It really was something funny because I did not have functioning questions because it wasn't clear. When I arrived from class and "How was your day? What did you ask? How did they answer?" The only thing I understood was "any questions?" Obviously, I didn't say anything because if I don't understand anything then I don't have any questions. I could not ask questions and I could not respond. But the rest truly I had joyful emotions, to, to, to learn, to get to know another, another person who is going to share. It was not a moment in class, but one in life because in the end, a lot of hours pass in the university and I know it is the person with the attitude to share. Sometimes I share more with them than my family because they arrive at five or six in the afternoon, and we are just the three, my son, my husband and me. Really, the first day was very satisfying, without answers, but satisfying.

SC: How do you compare the university in Venezuela?

EG: Look, uh, the rhythms are totally different. I assume it has to do with the culture, but you can really note it here the thing that functions directly for a course in order. In Venezuela, we did not have class very early in the morning or early at night. Because it was a public university there were a lot of conditions from the country. We didn't have a lot of classes, and as to the part of integration, suddenly here, many students come from other states or by way of some differences without counting the international foreigner. We simply had very few probabilities from other states because if you lived very distant, there was another university closer in the city where you lived. Though the difference is small, we were more united than here. We are more from the

same common culture and closer, and here everyone is in their own space but in exchange, it is more integrated. It's a more special type of moment to share the thought of how it is in the university.

SC: How have you changed since your first day until now?

EG: In Venezuela?

SC: Here.

EG: Ah, ok, look. I want to say that I have changed a lot. Like I said, the first day I did not understand anything, absolutely nothing, only, "good morning, good evening, good night". What I can say is that I did not understand what they were saying. Now I feel a little more secure. Not a hundred percent. I still don't go out too far alone. I feel a little more secure in the moment to go to a restaurant, to buy food, practically scared because I didn't say it right. Now, I order something and it's not what I want or I don't order much but then how else do you start? But, obviously, I can get around more on my own. It's difficult to share with my classmates because no one speaks the language or the language of another, everyone is from a different country and for me it's difficult to understand an American or someone who speaks English, but it's even more complicated to understand someone who is trying to speak English. I cannot understand. In the end, it is an environment to share because we are trying to learn. Really, I enjoy the things more enclosed. When I decide to go to the university, I can take a bus or transport as such. I feel like a student.

SC: Do you remember your first job? What did you do and where was it?

EG: Yes, I was working in Venezuela with the Secretary of Culture for the state of Bolívar. As I mentioned at the beginning of the interview, I had an aunt who participated or was part of the part of the culture of the city as a dance teacher at the school. She began working and she didn't day that her boss was the Secretary of Culture. When I began working she told me to go with her. There are also many other arts that make up this part of the culture. All the arts were part of the scene and I knew how to share it. It was emotional to work in something you like. We were in charge of everything typical of the culture of the state of Bolívar. It's a little bit big. I would move around to different municipalities two or three hours away and do everything to make a show or spectacular that was representative of each municipality in the state. It was really very satisfying to have this power because when the moment arrives, you sometimes want to be a part of what you are making but you are in the background, trying to do everything to make a scenic montage, the preparation to put out an event. When everything comes together, you are emotional. Suddenly I want to go over there for a sandwich, or I want to be dancing, I want to be present, I want to be doing another thing. But, they are experiences totally different. Then I saw another position, another level of this roll of preparation and I made a montage and teaching that is not just a show or spectacular characteristic of a municipality, it's what each city has to bring, it is to say, a community. This parte interests me a lot to show and to teach to not lose the value

that many times people are not pending. Also, it is a simple, humble place with major resources not the part of the food but learning.

SC: Are you working now?

EG: No, good. It is a question a little difficult for a woman. They always say, “no, I’m not working”. In my country we say, “housewife”. It is the hardest work. No, currently I am not working. I am only studying. The name is ESLI, and after class I go home and accept everything I have to do.

SC: Describe what you like or what you don’t like about the university.

EG: Look, uh, what I like it that I can share with other people. In fact, to be different people, to have a way of thinking, a woman to a man, a woman to another woman, a man to a man, in other words, and when you mix cultures on behalf of each has differences, a totally different culture and totally different language. The moment arrived that worried me the most at the beginning because I didn’t understand, they laughed when I shared with a classmate. We spend five minutes saying the same word but in the end, we all understood. Really, this integration, little by little takes a lot of time and effort. There is a classmate from China with a very marked accent y I don’t know if she is speaking English or Mandarin, I don’t know. But really what worried me is what I enjoy. What I really don’t like right now is one girl, I don’t know why, but she is always complaining. But, it is impossible not to complain at first. I come from has another rhythm in a rural part of the country. I was working and then, not. I accept that I cut that and now I am starting new. I gave classes in Venezuela. I was a professor of administration at a military university. The students were in their fourth semester. Now I am returning to being a student. I have to go back to the other side. I arrive home and I have to do homework, I have to study because I have a test and I’m like, “nooooo!” Because I crash. I fight with all the ways not to do it and I don’t want to at the time that I can do it because I spend all day at the university and the two or three hours that I have to study are at twelve at night. If I was to finish what I have to do is to find what my son has, because he doesn’t know either what to do so we have to find what homework to put first. Obviously, at twelve when he goes to bed he has his homework complete and I get mine completed and we a family totally responsible. I say that you have to turn in what the send you. Turn in the parts you know with confidence, the half because the other part I didn’t understand. But, good, it is getting resolved and improving along the way this is part of the ongoing process.

SC: How did you feel when you arrived to the United States?

EG: I felt happy within nervous. These are the words to describe it, happy within nervous. I was accustomed to knowing where we are going, what I was going to do, where to go for a solution, to arrive here I had to be totally dependent. To go to the bathroom, I had to know how to say it. I know how to say it but I had to pronounce it five or six times so the people could understand me. I had to show or act out what the thing was. This is why I tell you happy within nervous. Happy

because it is a different mindset to learn another language but nervous for the expectation because I am human and I don't know what is going to happen, what is going to happen in an hour or in two days. Everything that makes us human, we have some type of fear. But, good, these are things that everyone has to show not only moving to a new country but moving with the same country to a new city, or when you start a new job, when you start class or start a new project you are nervous, and for me it to go to a change with a certain sense to return to studying. And link a culture, the rules are totally different, this is to live being accustomed. I repeat, happy within nervous is how I felt.

SC: What do you miss from your country?

EG: Oh, my god. That is a little complicated. I think I have said everything that I miss in the interview. Look, I miss my mother enormously, and my father, and my sister. I have one older sister and we are always looking for how we can share with everyone. This is very supportive if I would suddenly get tired, what do I do or where do I go? And how I change my son so he can learn more quickly, to get through things a little more smoothly. Those who live far sometimes had to stay because now it is the other way around. I hope to get out of class so I can call them if they are able to answer in this moment. If I suddenly want to go eat at the university, the other classmates already went home. I don't have anyone to share the meal. When I get home, my son is in school, my husband is at work. When the weekend comes, I suddenly don't have plans. I can't call my sister to go for coffee or to take a walk, or go to a store. There is a park there very famous. It's called La Llovizna, nature and such, many, many trees, many animals, and my friends could share with me. I didn't have to look for something to do. Here, I don't know anyone. If I want to make food, who would I invite? I can't. So, the three of us invite each other. It's always us three. Oh, the food! The food I would get, there is one thing that we like a lot is *arepa*. It is better known as corn flour. They can make various things with this, empanadas, chicken. It is used as such a typical dish that the company in charge of making this started adding fiber so it would work better because is something very characteristic of Venezuela. I have just a little bit of this so we don't lose the custom. Really, if we stick together I believe everything with stick together if the family sticks together. Even more, when the family is very united, this is what I had to leave. Truly, it's a bit hard. Thanks to god, with social media and technology we can make the distance a little shorter.

SC: How do you compare your actual experience as an immigrant with what you imagined?

EG: Look, really, I cannot say basically one perspective. In my case, I try not to look for something good or positive because it's better that I tell you it is all positive because like everyone, we all have a situation in process and I try to give to each one. But really, I was in the middle of the university and I didn't have any help or much external contact, you could say. I can't tell you it was good or it was bad because it wasn't. So far it has been good. Also, where I am studying, we all immigrants. So, we accept each other the same. But for me, up until now it has been normal. Nothing to complain about.

SC: In your humble experience and knowledge, what advice would you give someone?

EG: Look, uh, it's complicated sometimes because I haven't suffered certain things and we use those emotions from the same experience, but to someone who had decided to make a big change sometimes they are told "patience". I think that easy, the word is easy. But when you start the process of that change it is true how significant this word is. Always get it to stick a certain way, that I did not know the word or the significance of the word, in other words, in everything that comes your way think what, how secure it is, how am I going to continue this moment, why am I doing it, how do I do it, where do I go and what do I do. Never forget your motive for making this change. Always look for ways to feel good about yourself and what you are doing. Because when you don't enjoy yourself, you don't enjoy what you are doing, what you are studying, who you are sharing with. It becomes difficult to decide where you want to go. So then, always look for a positive aspect. Really everything has an aspect, an advantage. You don't have to put anything negative, only the advantage. Start [inaudible] the positive that was what you were trying to do to benefit the situation. If you are far from your family, the force that gives you pain can lose the time that god is not sharing when he could be. And that you leave behind the problems that you have because problems are going to take every moment including when you are cooking with problems. The food is so you can leave these things. So then, always stay focused on motive to light your path.

SC: Is there someone or something that you would like to give thanks?

EG: Look, uh, yes, I want to give thanks to the person who is the same as the more special person in the word, that is God. Because I am created from God everything in his creation. For To me, nothing that have done or that I do is a casual product, or product of luck or of bad luck. For me, everything has a purpose. God a purpose specifically for each one. Every situation that you live, for me, in my opinion particular is something that you have to pass because it is the growth process that you are living. If you leave something negative or positive, many remember, or better to say, don't forget God when we are in a good moment or a happy moment, but when a moment arrives that makes us scared, what do you remember? First you have to value the positive and that is why the negative is there. You start to understand. Look, ok, right now I have this, I don't have that in every experience. Really, I never saw, imagined I would go to the United States, much less to study after I thought I was finished with studies and super grateful that I can, to have a family, to be here learning, to learn new things, learning a different language, learning another culture, to share all the learnings and help with the future, in this case. So then, I am infinitely grateful to God for everything his has given me and that I am safe and this with open many other doors.

SC: Very good, Eleidys. That's everything. Thank you very much for being here with me and sharing your story.

EG: Good, no, thank you. Really for putting confidence in me and for your interview. A greeting to all and have a good day.