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Interview no. 230

Myrna J. Deckert

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Myrna J. Deckert (1936-)
INTERVIEWER: Cecilia Barba A.
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: May 1, 1976
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: _____
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 230
TRANSCRIBER: Cecilia Barba A.
DATE TRANSCRIBED: May 5, 1976

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Executive Director of YWCA in El Paso. Born November 4, 1936 in Visalia, California; graduate of College of Sequoias, California, with a B.S. in Recreation Administration; has served as Youth Director, Asbury Methodist Church; Teen Director, YWCA; has lived in El Paso since 1957.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; discrimination; day-care services; activities of the YWCA to improve social level of people in El Paso.

DECKERT, Myrna J.

B: How did you come to the border?

D: I am here by choice. I chose to come to this area because I really enjoy it. I do really have an interest in the border.

B: Where do you come from?

D: I am from the Midwest.

B: What attracted you to the border?

D: It is the great appeal that the cultural combination of the border has for me; or shall I say, the contribution of the Latin character to the American culture.

B: What is the way that the Latin culture influences the American?

D: The so-called "American culture" is enriched by the influence of México. It adds sensitivity to the people. It is, to me, like it is for most Americans who live on the border, a great attraction. No matter if we can make more money in other places, we will stay here. I do like it here for a wide variety of reasons.

B: Which are those reasons?

D: One of them is the hope to become bilingual. I like the influence it has on my children. I like the slower way of living. It is not like in California, where people rush all the time. Here, people take their time.

B: So this area is unique in your opinion?

D: Yes, of course. This area is unique to all the United States. People in California, in all the Midwest, and especially cities like New York, are in a rush all the time. And it is not only that. The confrontation with another culture and other opinions, not only across the bridge but here in the same city, makes people extend their knowledge, their understanding. It makes them be more open. We are exposed to another world, an opportunity not everyone else has in the rest of the United States. But there is something that bothers me the most. It is racism.

B: In your opinion, how are racist attitudes on the border, if we compare them with the rest of the country?

D: Probably they are the same as anywhere else in the U. S.

B: Has the high interrelation that we have on the border changed racist attitudes?

D: No, it is probably the same. But I have to recognize that attitudes toward the Spanish-speaking people have changed with time. I think this is because the federal law is changing behavior. Law cannot change values but changes behavior, and hopefully this will change attitudes. When one becomes a participant in the actions that law requires, it generally changes your attitudes and your behavior. And finally after a while, it will change values.

The people on the border have been developing an appreciation for Mexican people for years, for hundreds of years. But this had been a patronizing attitude rather than [that of] an equal. I feel like something of this has been changed. In other words, as the Spanish-speaking people are getting in the mainstream of our community life, people are beginning to see them as equals, not in the relationship of boss/workers.

B: What is your attitude toward the bilingual program?

D: I would like to see people in the U.S., and in El Paso particularly, delighted to see their children speaking at least two languages. In Europe, it is a real status [symbol] to speak several languages. In the U.S. we wanted to see Mexican children speaking English, but not the other way [around]. I would like to see a program for our English-speaking children [in which they will] learn Spanish. I am definitely pro bilingual programs in both directions. It is very good for children, it opens them to new ways. It gives not only more economic opportunity, but it extends their criterium and knowledge by exposing them more directly to another culture.

B: What is your activity?

D: I am the Executive Director of the YWCA. My job is to implement the policies and programs of the board of directors. Before, I was the Teenager Director; I worked with teenagers. I used to walk up and down the streets of South El Paso, recruiting kids and adults to

work with those kids. And then I began to appreciate the Mexican people, especially the barrio Mexicans. I really enjoyed going to their communities, eating tacos. I really appreciated the people, the caring, the way they looked at their families; the mamas' concern for their children, and even the papas'. The culture in general leads them to share. They could be poor, poor, poor, the barrio people; but whatever they have, they share it. And it is really nice, because there are a lot of people that are a lot more rich and a lot less generous. Then I understood the barrio people. They are not self-enclosed, not lazy people. If they are, that is because of the circumstances, for the most part, and it is not because they want to be there. Some people say that if they wanted, they could get out of there. That is not right; it is the whole structure of society that keeps them there.

I will give you an example. The federal government subsidizes day-care services, but you have to make under a certain amount of money in order to have your child in the program. In other words, if your family is poor, and the family is composed of mami, papi, and two or more children, daddy has to make the minimum wage; and mami can work also at a minimum wage. [This makes] an amount of \$550.00 a month as a total income. As long as you don't make above the \$550.00 a month, you can keep your children in a day-care program, paying a nominal fee for child care. Say a preschooler had to have care. Once you make \$550.10, you are not eligible anymore for that program. That is keeping people where they are rather than letting them pay more money for the care of their children and keep

them in the program. So the whole program is, in my opinion, a racist policy. It is a racist federal policy, because it does not allow the people to make their way up, and work themselves out of the ghetto area. People need to work to try to change this. Because no matter how the people work--the mama could work hard, maybe get a raise in her salary, maybe get a better job, or training; but then she has to take her children out of the day-care program that is subsidized. The difference--and that is what we have to understand, Cecilia--is that [at] a center that cares for children whose families are at poverty level, the cost is \$7.50; that is the most. The centers that serve middle income families or not poverty level (I mean those who are not eligible for those services) pay \$25.00 a week. You see the difference; it is not even comparable. And what I feel should happen is that subsidy day-care should be according to incomes, so the more you make, the more you pay.

B: At these day-care centers, that are your specialty, [what] are the effects of interrelation?

D: The interrelation takes place among all the minorities--not only between the Mexican minority with Anglos, but also with other minorities. In the barrio in South El Paso, Black children normally speak Spanish instead of English. That is where they grew up, so Spanish is their first language. We had a case [in which] one day a Black woman came to us. She was upset because her children were speaking Spanish and she couldn't understand them.

Interrelation reaches any group. There are a lot of military

people in El Paso, like Korean women that married soldiers when they were sent there. When their children are sent to the day-care service where the predominant language is Spanish, actually these Korean background children learn to speak Spanish as a first language.

B: What are the plans for the near future?

D: We are now trying to establish the funding we receive for the day-care program. Seventy percent comes from the federal government, and the remaining 30 percent we have to find in the city. This is very serious, because if we complete the amount, we can keep going; but if not, we have to close everything. This is our constant problem.

Another of our plans is to move a lot of our programs out to other geographic areas in the city. As the city is becoming larger, we would like to construct other buildings. Now we are working on plans for that, trying to figure out what is exactly the method and the best way to approach these areas.

Also we are seeing the possibility of buying a big automobile and setting it up for preschool children to go around to all the nursery schools to teach education, and other different kinds of programs, like teaching parents how to treat preschool children. It costs about \$60,000.00, and we have an agency in Houston that is going to give us the money. So it is just a matter of planning.

As Executive Director of the YWCA, I have the responsibility to hire all the staff. So I have to be sure that we pay the right salaries and that we give the right benefits and services.

B: Any other interesting comment?

D: Yes. There is something that I have noticed among the barrio people which I work with. They don't like the word Chicano. They refer to themselves as Americans, not even Mexicans.

B: What is your attitude toward the word "Chicano."

D: It is an activist word. The way I see Chicanos is that they are Mexican Americans who are trying to make changes, those who are socially active.

B: How do you see the problems they are fighting for?

D: I do not think they have a problem. I feel like most of them are trying to work within the system to make some changes that need to be made. To me, theirs is a situation, not a problem, as the Black Movement.