

Linda Zuba

**Interviewed by Megan Zuba
For Midway Village Museum
6/30/2007**

Note: The interviewer had difficulty with her microphone. Many of the questions are inaudible.

Linda Zuba: My name is Linda Zuba. I'm married. I have three children. I have a college degree. I have a bachelor's in nursing and a Masters degree in nursing and a law degree. I work at a law firm with my husband Zuba and Associates. I work as a part-time attorney. I've been there for six years. I am from . . . I live in Rockford, Illinois. I am originally from Bogotá, Colombia and I came when I was four years old and that would have been 44 years ago. My, I came here with my mother and my sister. We lived in Bogotá, Colombia. We had a very, very large extended family there and my mother worked part time but she was mostly home with us.

And my mother and father separated and she wanted to come to the United States because of the opportunities that it would provide for her two daughters. She had a cousin and a sister living in California and she was willing to leave her family behind in Colombia to make a new start. She left her family in Colombia to make a new start in California and, but her goal was always to offer her two daughters an opportunity to succeed in the United States. They, we went to California until I was close to 14 years old and then we moved to Rockford and the reason we moved into Rockford in the early 70s was because my sister married someone from the Rockford area and she wanted us to be close to her when she started a family. So that's why we left California.

My mother had not been in this country before we came. I think I answered it was my mother, my sister and myself that came here. We lived in California for 10 years before moving to Rockford and in Rockford we knew, like I said, my sister and my brother-in-law and they helped us get settled in.

Megan Zuba: Was there anyone else from Colombia in Rockford before you came? Or in the United States?

LZ: Yes. There were. . .we met a few people actually. My brother-in-law's brother and sister-in-law lived here and they were both from Colombia. And we met some people from Colombia through an agency in town [Rockford] called La Voz Latina that helps Hispanic individuals.

MZ: Where did you stay when you first got to Rockford?

LZ: We stayed with my sister and my brother-in-law.

MZ: Do you remember how you found a place to live at the house or did somebody help you?

LZ: Well we always lived with them. My mom and myself always lived with my sister and my brother-in-law and they had children. They started having children so my mother helped them take care of the children and keep house and that was what was normal in Colombia having the extended family.

MZ: What about work. Where did your mom work?

LZ: For the most part she had, . . .as far as work, my mom did odds and ends and a lot of different kinds of jobs but most of the time she was home taking care of my sister's kids and myself. She had a day care at home. She also helped different agencies doing different kind of jobs. But she tried staying at home as much as possible because she felt very strongly about being present for me and being a stay-at-home mom as much as possible.

MZ: [Didn't you say you had to work]? [inaudible]

LZ: Yeah. I started working really young, probably about 14, because she never asked me to but I just tried to help by working and contributing. I usually worked at restaurants. I worked at [Sambos] in Loves Park for a long time.

MZ: [inaudible]

LZ: No, I would just drive to different places looking for jobs and I waitressed there for a long time and then I started working at Logli when I was in high school as a cashier and I worked there for several years.

MZ: So how did you get around? Did your mom have a car?

LZ: No, my mother or she never had a car but my brother-in-law let me use one of his cars.

MZ: [She didn't have a car?]

LZ: No, she didn't have a car. She never got a driver's license and so living in California we were used to always taking buses and she took buses in Colombia so that was just. . .

MZ: [inaudible]

LZ: Well it wasn't easy because the bus systems in Rockford weren't very good and so it was difficult getting around. So we were really dependent on my brother-in-law.

MZ: Did you walk a lot?

LZ: Yeah, we walked quite, a bit not as much as in California. But we did, I rode a bike everywhere.

MZ: Did you speak English?

LZ: When we moved here, we didn't speak English, when we moved to this country and then, but I wasn't ever allowed to speak, my mom didn't want us to speak English around the house once we learned because she didn't want us to forget the Spanish language so. It didn't take long pick it up in school because everyone was speaking English. My mom

took English classes and she had a very strong accent but she understood the language and she could read and write it but she had a very strong accent so sometimes it was hard to understand her.

MZ: How did you get in with the community?

LZ: In, well in Rockford? The way we integrated into our community, when we were in California even though there were a lot of Americans in our neighborhood, I'd say mostly Americans there were quite a few Hispanics at our school. We were at a Catholic school and church and everyone was very accepting of us, of the Hispanic families, and when we moved to Rockford, it was very different because there weren't many Hispanics and I think I went to St. Peters at the end of eighth grade and I don't ever remember seeing any other Hispanics there at the time. And at Boylan there might have been two Hispanics in my class so it was different.

MZ: You went to high school at Boylan?

LZ: Yes, I did, I went to high school at Boylan and it was quite different than because there were less Hispanics around so in a way people I think were more accepting of it because it was kind of unusual on the other hand we kind of stuck out more. My mom always spoke in Spanish in front of everyone so, and we ate different kinds of food. Most people weren't used to the kind of food we ate and. . . What else do you want to know about?

MZ: Did you belong to any organizations? Did you go to church?

LZ: Yes, we went to St. Peters Church, Catholic Church, we were Catholic and we did go to church every Sunday. Those were, that was, we didn't belong to any other groups as a family.

MZ: So are you active in politics in your community? [inaudible]

LZ: I'm active in other organizations now as we weren't when I was growing up but I am very involved with La Voz Latina, a Hispanic Resource Center. I've been on their board for probably close to 20 years and it's important for me because I know what it was like coming here as an immigrant and all the kinds of help that we needed and so it's an important organization for me to try to provide that type of help for other people who are coming to this country. We just try to support programs to improve education with the young kids. When I first belonged to La Voz Latina we were doing more job training for the adults. We don't have grants for that right now but we do a lot of parenting classes for, to help parents with their children and get them acclimated to the school systems. I've done things related to health education for the Hispanic community and fitness programs.

MZ: So back to when you first came here, did you fit in? How did you feel people treated you? Did you feel any different?

LZ: I was definitely felt different when we moved here because like I said I was the only Hispanic of my friends and, you know, we just have different traditions.

MZ: What were your different traditions?

LZ: Probably the types of foods we had and it was, do you want to know specific foods we ate? Well when we moved, things have changed a little bit because now you can find a lot of the foods we ate, but we would always have plantains which is a form of banana except you cook it. Mangoes and papayas.

MZ: They hadn't had those before?

LZ: Well they hadn't when we first moved here in the early 70s and people, friends used to tease us a lot about the kinds of food we ate.

MZ: Joking around?

LZ: Yeah, I suppose joking around. But also, in Colombia extended families always lived together and that wasn't, that was normal for us and people kind of thought of it as being unusual that my mom and I lived with my sister and brother-in-law and my nieces and nephew.

MZ: Why did you live with all of them? [inaudible]

LZ: Well we all lived together because, well for one my mom pretty much did everything. She cleaned and cooked and took care of my sister's children so that my sister and brother-in-law could work. And so in many ways it was convenience but it was also, just like I said, a very normal way of life.

MZ: [inaudible] to live with your family?

LZ: Yeah. It was normal to live with your family.

MZ: Did you feel unwelcome anywhere?

LZ: Oh, every now and then people would tease me. I would say, I don't look real Hispanic. People thought I was Italian and so they just assumed I was Italian. But once they found out I wasn't Italian then people would, they'd call me a Spic. You know sometimes they. . .

MZ: [inaudible] [People at schools?]

LZ: People at school once they found out or anyone, anyone I would meet.

MZ: [How did that make you feel?]

LZ: I didn't like it but I wasn't surprised because I just knew people like that and especially teenagers can be mean. It didn't bother me as much if they said that to me or were offensive to me if they said anything about my mom that was hurtful because I remember them calling my mom a Spic.

MZ: How did your mom feel?

LZ: It didn't bother her at all, at least she never acted like it bothered her, because she was, she was a very classy lady and she didn't have anything to be ashamed of. And so she just felt it was their problem or their weakness for being unaccepting.

MZ: [inaudible]

LZ: I know my mother always planned on staying here the rest of her life. She really missed her family and her sisters although a lot of family members moved to this country, she had a brother and a cousin that move to Chicago. But she missed just the family life in Colombia and, but she would never have left it was just, it was just easier to be successful in this country and she would've never wanted to leave us. My mother was never disappointed about coming here, moving here, she knew was the best thing she ever did for us and Columbia can be very hard place to raise a family. Not everyone has the opportunity to go on to university like we had the opportunity here and that's what, education was extremely important for my mother. She wanted us to get the best kind of education possible and I was always very fortunate when I was little living in California, an older couple were very fond of us and they would, they met us at church and they offered to pay my tuition at a Catholic school as long as I would come visit them on Sundays or we, we would go over there after church on Sundays. And so they paid my way through a good part of my Catholic schooling. And then we just got different help.

I'm just going to go through [may be looking at the list of interview questions and answering them without them being read aloud?] . . . As far as work I helped, I contributed by working at home. I worked at the restaurant or at Logli's so I paid for a lot of my own expenses to help out. And while I was at Boylan, Boylan helped my mom pay for my tuition.

It was always important for my mother that we would remember our roots. She would always talk to us about traditions in Colombia and family. In fact a lot of family members would take turns flying out and staying with us for extended periods of time and again that was just something that was accepted.

MZ: Did you do anything else culturally, besides eating other foods, did you do anything else? [inaudible]

LZ: I can't really think of any specific things. Maybe a lot of the stories we read and we read a lot of books that were traditional Colombian stories and I probably. . . for Christmas we didn't believe in Santa Claus. There wasn't a Santa Claus. There is

something called El Niño Dios which means the little . . . it was really baby Jesus was responsible for gifts so it was odd. All my friends would be celebrating Christmas along with the Santa Claus tradition but we didn't have that, we didn't do anything about the Easter Bunny or Easter eggs and we didn't celebrate Thanksgiving for a long time because that just wasn't part of what was Colombian heritage. And the music we listened to a lot of Colombian music, you know, those types of things were different. When I was, at some point in high school I didn't want anyone to know I was Hispanic or Colombian because I didn't want to be considered different from anyone else and it wasn't until I went to college that I started appreciating my roots and where I came from and I wasn't, I was no longer really embarrassed to speak Spanish whereas in high school, at some point I became, I didn't want to speak Spanish. I didn't want to stand out as being different.

MZ: [Did you . . . like . . . American ways, like have you left any of your Columbian heritage . . .?]

LZ: I think for the most part we tried being, I tried being bicultural as much, I mean I still think a lot about what my mother said. I've tried to expose my kids to a lot of the foods that we ate and, but I'm definitely Americanized. I've just been here too long. But I do believe that the healthiest thing for a migrant is to become bicultural. Not forget their past but keep the best of both worlds and I think that's what I've tried to do.

MZ: Like what? What do you really want to remember about your culture?

LZ: Well the connection with the family and the importance of always being there for your family and . . . my mother always said "Charity begins at home." So I think it's, I've always tried to keep my family very close and spend a lot of quality time together because of the importance of that. Being affectionate. We always, we weren't allowed to leave the house or go to bed without having kissed my mom and that was, I think that's really important because you just never know when you may not see that person again. And so that was something that I remember thinking was very different in my family is we were extremely affectionate and, you know, in my 20s I could sit on my mom's lap you know and she would cuddle me and I wasn't, I didn't feel ashamed of it or, because that was just the way it was. I don't see as much affection with the kids in the United States. I may be wrong but I have never witnessed it to the degree that I have seen among our culture so that's something I'd always want to keep, telling your children as often as possible that you love them and showing affection towards them.

You know, that's something I miss with my relatives. We, both my mother and my father are dead now so I was, saw extended family a lot more when they were alive and they would come from Columbia and we would visit. We would have big picnics on Sundays and my mom was always cooking up big meals. So that's changed. I have not, at some point I'd like to go back to Columbia. I still have a lot of relatives there but I have some scattered in California and in Florida.

I was, I do remember, I think I already said this, but I do remember being embarrassed about my mother being different and, you know, it took her longer to assimilate. Like

where she came from women would never wear slacks they always wore very nice dresses or skirts and heels and she did that probably until I was close to the end of high school, she finally started wearing pants and you would see her outside in a dress mowing the lawn and I remember kids teasing me about that because they didn't understand why she wouldn't wear pants but that was just, that was part of her culture and at the time I thought it was different but she just felt it was proper etiquette to be, for a woman to be dressed properly every day in a nice dress.

MZ: So your mom basically did everything because she didn't have a husband?

LZ: No, they separated when I was really little. I reconnected with him, with my father years later. But, yeah she did everything and she would always tell people that she was both father and the mother because she could be pretty stern. She never became naturalized. She was, she did have a permanent resident, we were, we all had our green cards when we came to the United States so we did go through all the paperwork and when we received our green cards we came, which means you're a permanent resident, that's when we move to this country. She would have liked to have become a citizen but by the time she was thinking seriously about it she became ill and she ended up dying of breast cancer, but she would have loved, she loved this country very much.

MZ: When did you become a citizen?

LZ: I actually became a citizen some time right after college. So probably sometime in the 1980s.

MZ: How did you feel about that? Was that really important to you?

LZ: It, the only thing that made it important to me was to be able to vote, because I didn't feel that I was, I didn't feel there was anything not given to me or any opportunities I couldn't have. I've had every opportunity during those years, but then I realized in college I wasn't able to vote so. That was really the motivating factor for me to get my citizenship and I also I was married by then. I was married to an American so part of me knew I could stay here permanently but I did want to vote.

MZ: Do you have any good memories of growing up in Rockford or anything?

LZ: Well, Rockford was very different from, my only memories are California because I came from Columbia to California when I was four. So I don't really have any specific memories except for that of family in Columbia but, there was a pretty big difference in California and Illinois and I, well Rockford was probably much more conservative when I first moved here. It isn't as much now, but when I first came it was. I dressed very different, I dressed more like people in California just whatever was in style in California it took about six months or a year to come to Rockford so, I remember thinking that was very unusual but I, California felt very fast-paced when I would go back there in the summers to visit family. They just, it's just really a different lifestyle is more of, I'm sure there are a lot of people who do well in school but the people I knew and family they just

wanted to get out of high school so they could get good jobs and work, they wanted to work hard, but they wanted to have fun it was more about having fun and enjoy, this is in California, whereas the people, there were more people I knew in Rockford that were more interested in going on to school and getting an advanced degree.

MZ: [Do you think that would be different than in Columbia?]

LZ: Well a lot of people, unless you're in the upper class you don't have the opportunity to go to college because it's Columbia, yes.

MZ: So you had a lot more opportunity in Rockford?

LZ: Yes. I think if you put your mind to it, you have, there are resources for people in the United States to help you. If you want to go to college but you don't know what to do or how to pay for it there are places you can go and talk to people. I didn't, it was, I kind of figured it all out by myself. It took a long time and people weren't offering to help me I just kept, if one person didn't help I would go to somebody else or I would read, I was just self-motivated that way but I definitely see how people can get lost in the system if they don't have counselors at school or someone who's, who's watching over them. A lot of migrant parents can't help their kids because they don't know the system and they don't, they don't know what kind of suggestions to make. They say "Yeah, get an education" but from there they don't usually know.

MZ: [Did your mom say that?]

LZ: My mom couldn't help. She wasn't able; she didn't know how to help me. She would introduce me to people so she'd find out if there is someone out there who could maybe answer questions but she didn't go to school here besides to learn English so she couldn't help me sort through the system as far as how to go to school, and even what tests to take, or what classes to take, financial aid, so I pretty much did that on my own. And I think a lot of the migrants, immigrants that are coming now, if they're not self-motivated or if they don't find the right people to help them they just kind of gave up. They don't get the help at home.

MZ: How do you feel about the current debate about immigration?

LZ: Well, I think it's extremely complicated. I'm glad there's some kind of reform taking place.

MZ: [What's complicated about it?]

LZ: What's complicated is what exactly should take place as far as immigration reform. I'm glad there's talk and that there's some reform that they're trying to accomplish but there's. . . there's so many people that oppose, and probably one of the biggest things I suppose is allowing the current illegal immigrants, giving them any kind of path to citizenship, and a lot of people automatically assume that's amnesty. And I guess I don't

believe that's amnesty. There are fines that would be given to these people. It wouldn't be, they wouldn't be citizens right away, they would have to go through several loopholes before they got there but, these people are here to work, and they don't take, you know, they don't come here to work off of, to live off of welfare, they come here to work. And I know a lot of American companies and a lot of farmers who rely on immigrants to do labor and a lot of the labor are, it's labor that other groups don't want to do.

So, I think we do need to secure the border. I don't think it's right for people to just be coming by the thousands and thousands every day crossing the border illegally. I think Mexico should step up and do more about the illegal immigration. But I, I think ultimately we need to be more accepting of the people that are coming and the immigration debate has hurt really everyone, anyone who's and immigrant is affected by it because people are angry and the anger ends up being directed at both legal and illegal immigrants so its, and it causes a lot of division among the different cultures and races. So it's got a long ways to go but I do think that we should have some kind of a, ability for people to come here and work.

MZ: Do you think your personal experience has affected your opinion on this?

LZ: Well my, I suppose part of my personal experience. It was easier then, my mom applied for a visa and then a green card and it didn't take all that long to get it, where as now, you know, it can take you years and years before you'd ever be allowed to come into this country if you want to come work or. So it has made it harder but it's the, for me it's also a moral issue and I consider myself a Christian person and I have a hard time believing that we could turn our eyes to people who are in such dire needs and so desperately looking for a job, of which we do have many jobs for them, and it's hard for me to turn my eyes to that and think, you know, we're just sending them back to nothing. They can't find jobs there, A lot of them have children and families that they're just trying to support and I think that there should be some kind of system that it could be a win-win. But there are some racial, I think there are, is some racism involved there also. And this country's made up of immigrants. But it's the same thing when the Irish and the Italians were coming and the Jews, it was the same thing. They were mistreated. So it takes awhile for the acceptance to take place.

MZ: So do you think you'll be living in Rockford for the rest of your life?

LZ: I'll have some kind of connection in Rockford probably for the rest of my life. Our job is here and we have family here and that's important. We probably will come and go a lot as we get older, as our kids get older and go off to college. But we'll always have some connection, some home. Rockford will probably be our home base from whatever else we end up doing. And I do think it's a good community to raise your family, although I'm, it's easy for me to say because I didn't have to put my kids through the public school system and deal with all that, I, having children in a Catholic school where I have more control of the kind of education they're having, in a way, and they don't have to be bused to the other side of town and, it's a very sad statement when you think that Hispanics and blacks have some of the lowest graduation rates in Rockford, then much

higher than the national and state average, so. I think that's a very sad statement for Rockford.

MZ: [Are you in any organizations right now to try to higher the rate?]

LZ: Well we, working with La Voz Latina, you know that's, of the kids that are in the youth programs at La Voz Latina, 98% of those kids do graduate from high school because they have the extra support.

MZ: What do you do at La Voz Latina?

LZ: Like I said earlier, I'm on the board of directors at La Voz Latina and I've been on the board there for a long time. But, also I'm on the board of United Way and we've talked a lot about the importance of education in this community in United Way and one of their priorities is to improve graduation rate. So you hear a lot in Rockford now about truancy and what we found out is that, that's, kids that are chronically truant often end up dropping out, so a significant amount of money is being given to the truancy programs in Rockford and, my involvement in United Way was, a lot of it has been surrounding it, the issue of education and truancy.

MZ: Any last words?

LZ: Any last words. I'm glad to have been lucky enough that my mother was courageous enough to leave her country, even though I know it was hard and I remember her crying a lot as she thought about her mom and some of her sisters that she was real close to, that she left back in Colombia, so I'm very, very lucky that she was willing to do that. She sacrificed a lot in order to make a better life for her children. And not only having left Columbia but I'm also extremely fortunate that she left California because, where I was living in California and the friends I was hanging around with, although when I was with them they were great kids and it was a great community, when I went back to visit in high school most of my friends were involved in gangs, some had dropped out of high school, one had gotten pregnant. And so I could've been right in the middle of that trap in California had we not moved Rockford. So Rockford has been an incredible blessing for me.

MZ: [inaudible]

LZ: Well there was more stability here. And there was, for whatever reason, the gang involvement became a huge thing in the neighborhood that I was being raised in in California and I got away from all that and had a much more stable life in Rockford and there were more people, more of my friends, particularly my husband was more, his goal was more getting a good education and I think when you are around people that are interested in pursuing their goals and making something of themselves then, you know, it's contagious, so I was doing the same thing. And had I been in California I might have decided to do what my friends were all doing and get involved in gangs and drop out of school so, so when I hear people sometimes complain about Rockford, you know, I think

people can complain about any place that they're living nothing's perfect but Rockford does offer a lot of opportunities you just have to look for them and take advantage of it and so I don't regret it for a moment that we ended up in Rockford, Illinois.