

## Tiffany Rohweder interview with Ms. Haghighi

- ★ Tiffany: The following interview was conducted on behalf of the oral history program of the Washington County Museum and Century High School. The interviewee is Saidah Haghighi. The Interviewer is Tiffany Rohweder. The Interview took place at Century High school on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004 at 3:45.
- ★ Tiffany: Were you Born in the U.S.?
- ★ Saidah: Yes
- ★ Tiffany: What part of the country?
- ★ Saidah: I was born in New York
- ★ Tiffany: New York?
- ★ Saidah: Yes
- ★ Tiffany: What is your cultural background
- ★ S: Well, I was born in NY, Uh, my mom is from Puerto Rico. And my Dad is From Iran.
- ★ T: Oh really? Like, how has that diverse background affected you, today?
- ★ S: Oh, its effected me a great deal because, Um ,at home we spoke Spanish, and English. I heard far sea being spoken, When my father, his family and friends were in the house. We had, just a multi-cultural food at home all the time. And, Um, Just people coming in and out, friends of the family, from different backgrounds. And then that led me to take up a career, working with multi-cultural people.
- ★ T: Do you think that speaking different languages has helped you in the community today?
- ★ S: oh yeah definitely! I speak Spanish I don't speak Far Sea unfortunately, I was never taught that by my father. But my mom did teach me Spanish, and I have been to Puerto Rico about a dozen times. And I lived in South America for about 10 years. So, Its helped me a great deal communicating with parents and students and other staff members and just knowing the culture and knowing about the culture, is very helpful.
- ★ T: What is the Difference between our culture and Puerto Rico's you said..the Differences
- ★ S: Uh, Well there are a couple of things. Well the Climates one. But, the family unit. The family unit in basically any Hispanic or Latin American family. Is more, I would say larger. The extended family is really, really makes up a large part of the family. Its not just mom, dad , and brother and sister. Its more like, mom, dad, grandma, Aunts, Great aunts, great grandfather. You know, it's a large family unit. And they tend to do many things together. Celebrate many holidays, and anniversaries, and events, together as a whole family. So family is a really big part of Latin America Culture.
- ★ T: Would you say that the schooling over there is different then from here?
- ★ S: Uh huh, we do have differences in educational, I would say format. The year is different. Just the structure, like when we are on vacation, they are in school. Also some of the classes the focus on a lot of the social sciences and politics is a big issue there. Students get these classes at an earlier age. Then they do here. There are a lot of public schools In South America because the public school system, educational system,

unfortunately is under funded. So, uh, many parents chose to put their students in private schools. Private institutions, and they're quite expensive. But there are many more private institution there then there are here in the United States. Lets see...

★ T: Did you ever go to school there?

★ S: well no, but I worked in an all boys private school, Religious school, Catholic school, for ten years. So I was immersed in that type of culture.

★ T: Were the taught English there?

★ S: Yes! They were.

★ T: how did they respond to that, did they like it?

★ S: yeah, I mean speaking English is a very good thing to learn abroad. Its English as a foreign language, when you are learning the language abroad as opposed to when you are learning it in the united states which is English as a second language. But yes, English is taught all the way from pre-school all the way up to the university level.

★ T: Do you think that it is taught better over there then it is as English taught here?

★ S: I wouldn't say better, There are different methods used to teach both languages, some are similar some are different. Basically we want to get students attention, we want to get them motivated to learn the language, have fun when learning the language so anything that involves, having fun, practicing communication skills. Using the language, in a practical way. Can be taught in both languages, and that's how is was taught in South America. There were many language academies, also, for adults who wanted to learn, to speak English. For job opportunities, or to travel. And So it was taught for practical purposes

★ T: Um do you feel, oh I just asked you that question sorry.

★ S: Its ok

★ T: Is there anything that you suggest the we change about our programs here?

★ S: English, Language programs?

★ T: ESL or the LEP program, I think that's one

★ S: foreign language?

★ T: Like being Taught English. Do you think there is any ways they should change how they teach it?

★ S: There is so many ways to teach English as a foreign language, and, I don't think there is just one *right* way, I think a combination of various strategies and techniques make it, a better process. And its more probable that the student is going to learn more through various processes, every student is unique, and different. Including cultural aspect, the environmental aspect making them feel comfortable were they are, providing them with rich text book, literature, natural literature. Making it practical, making it fun. All these things, um, if you include all of these things, and just so many more things, I think that, that, is a good program, were every that may be. And I think that we provide that, to some extent here at Century High School. It's a difficult thing to learn a second language.

★ T: What are the basics, How do you, What are the first things you teach? What are the fist things you teach them, or tell them to say in English?

★ S: Well we have a newcomers class, which is composed of students that have just arrived in the country , and they have been here less then 6 months, So their conversation skills are very limited. Many of them have had limited schooling in their first language so, maybe they have finished 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and then they come here are placed in a High

School setting. And so we teach them basic survival skills. And things they need to know. Um, questions that they can ask their teachers for clarification, just like basic things. Like, "can I go to the bathroom", "I don't understand, can you please repeat", "how do you spell this, how do you say this in English". Um, you know just the basic things. And then we go through, Situations were we can include them learning the alphabet, the numbers, the colors. But not just teach them isolated but teach them in a context were other things are included, so its just more rich, and meaningful. To them.

★ T: Why do you think that its harder for them to further their education? Is it because of the language barrier?

★ S:I think a language is a major point, especially the way our universities are designed, basically its too hard for main stream students to get into college, let alone, a second language learner. It's very challenging, it's very competitive. And so a lot of our students, what they end up doing is they choose to go to a Community college, to better their language skills, for like a year, 6 months, or 2 years. And from their maybe take some courses at the community college level, and once they feel comfortable, some even go on to a 4 year college. Like PSU or OSU, or a college like that. But language is an issue, but also its just the whole adapting process. Just adapting to a structural educational system which they are not accustomed to. Culture is a big thing too, adapting to a new culture, and so they are going through a lot of changes. On top of their own personal issues at home, with other family members, and , you know job issues, health related issues, um, legal status issues, there are so many things going on in their lives. That um, education is important, but it may not be top priority, at this moment in their lives, and it will be eventually, um, for some it is, for some it just isn't. They need to find a job, you know money is a essential, food is essential, so everybody has a priority list. And a lot of kids don't go to college because of that.

★ T: Why do you think there is such a high drop out rate?

★ S:For very similar reasons, because of family needs, and family situations, some times parents ask their kids to help out at home and it's not uncommon for a high schools student here at Century High School that may belong to the ESL program to once leaving school at 3:30 to go home and have to take care of their 4 or 5 brothers and sisters and cook and clean and maintain the household until mom and dad get home at 10 or 11 o'clock. And put the kids to sleep, and help them with their homework, and so there is very little time left for reflection, for the students. Let alone, studying ,or reading , or doing papers. That's why we offer the tutoring program so they can stay an extra hour after school and get some of that work done. Because we know that once they get home, it's not going to happen.

★ T: Why do you think there is such a high pregnancy rate, among Hispanics?

★ S:Oh gosh if I knew the answer to that!

★ T:Is it more socially acceptable?

★ S: Hmm.. I think, Gosh you know I don't know? We try as much as possible to educate students and we try give them little snippets and pieces of information in their health classes, and our parent meetings, and stuff like that but some kids just fall through those cracks and peer pressure, um, you know gosh I don't know. Some young ladies just want to be mothers, they want to, and I know many cases of student that get pregnant so they can leave the household, so they can be independent, and yeah, ok if im pregnant I am

going to get married, and therefore I can leave my home and I can have my own family. And I won't have to have this responsibility of taking care of my brothers and sisters, I can have my own family, and some have that mentality. And they think it is going to happen, and lo-en-behold the kid comes along, and maybe dad leaves, or boy friend leaves, or just they are way too young, and so yeah, that's just a great question. I wish I could figure that one out.

- ★ T: In Puerto Rico, is it common for teenage girls to get married, and have children, while in High School?
- ★ S: You know it used to be. When my mom was a teenager, I know that because my mom got married at a very old age according to her brothers and sisters.
- ★ T: What was that age?
- ★ S: She got married at the age of 30.
- ★ T: Oh wow.
- ★ S: Yeah, and she married my dad who was 32. So and my mom left Puerto Rico. But here brothers and sisters stayed there and many of them were married at the age of 22, 23. So right out of college or in college. And it is acceptable, but I think that now as time goes by women are realizing that, "Hey I can have a career", "I can have an education", "And I can also have a family", and I don't have to have a husband and children at the age of 16, to give meaning to my life. I can start off my college, get married, or finish college and then get married. And I think that's what the trend is right now, to wait a little longer. And establish something in their lives, before they actually make the commitment a family and children.
- ★ T: That's a really big commitment too.
- ★ S: Yeah!
- ★ T: Um, Hold on let me see my questions. Is it harder do you think to teach students English to students who don't practice or they don't speak it at home? Do they end up just coming back into the program? Or do they every fully learn English? If they don't practice?
- ★ S: At home, if possible. The reality is that students, their parents only speak Spanish, and their family members, older family members in the household only speak Spanish. If they have other siblings or cousins, nieces or nephews, you know they may speak English. But for the most part, it's a Spanish speaking household. So you know we don't go and fool ourselves that they are going to practice at home. Is it better? Yes! They more you practice any language, the better it is for you. The more opportunities you get to speak, and read, and write it, in a meaningful and practical way. Yes, it's better. But that's not the case. We try to use our class time to the fullest, and try to speak as much English as possible in the class room, and then students during the course of the school day are exposed to various teachers, many of which don't speak Spanish. So that's good. You know. So we encourage that a lot. But they always go home and their first language in many cases is Spanish at home. They only speak Spanish.
- ★ T: Would you ever set up programs to help with their parents?
- ★ S: We do that. We do have programs that exist, we have um, the Spanish Outreach Comity. Which is a group of educators from various high schools, and middle schools. And we get together once a month and have parent meetings, and we hold parent meetings, in the community. At various schools, most of them are here at Century High

School actually. We have had 6 this year at Century

★ T: I never knew of that.

★ S: Yeah, we publicize this on the Spanish news, and we have speakers come from the community. That talk about health care, they talk about medical, things that are available in the community. We talk about prevention, we talk about how to help their kids in school. We talk about immigration issues. We talk about You know child care. We talk about recycling, we talk about drugs and alcohol. We have speakers come and parents have suggested that we talk about these topics. So we plan ahead of time, and offer these talks, and these seminars and work shops to parents. And they last about 2 or 3 hours in the evening. From 6 to 9 o'clock. And it's a pretty, fairly good turn out considering that we have 24% of our Hillsboro School District is Hispanic. When 40 parents show up to a meeting you kind of disappointed. But we are still plugging away there. Hoping that the numbers will come up

★ T: How do you advertise besides the morning news?

★ S: Oh, the meetings, oh yeah. Ok well we, we have little flyers that come out 4 days prior to the meeting, and we give them to the students. Then the same flyers are mailed home. Via our mail room here at Century. And then we make home visits the day before, and we knock on doors, and we hand deliver the same exact invitation. So they receive the same invitation 3 times. If that's not enough we have radio announcements on the Spanish radio, 2 days prior

★ T: Oh my goodness.

★ S: yeah, its lovely. And then we have it in our Spanish newsletter. So when we send our the Spanish newsletter there is a little invitation. So we do try to promote it as much as possible, and yet we do have a small turn out. But hey 40 is better the 0.

★ T: its worth a try though. Um here is our question. Do you think there is anything else you can add, or haven't already said?

★ S:(reads the question) Um, I guess I have said before that I have just been here in the district for 4 years, but, um, I like what I see so far. As far as what the school district has done. We have, how would I say it, a thorough network of people in the district collaborating together, working together for the same common goal. Which is to provide services to our Hispanic community. To provide, not only, educational services, but also educate them on possibilities for their future, and possibilities for family members. And we all know each other, and everybody in the district knows each other. We meet at various times during the month. For whatever, depending on what comity you belong to. Many of us belong to similar comities. And we meet and discuss issues that concern our students. Whether the students go here at Century, or to Hilhi, or Liberty. And we all have a common goal, to provide the services and to have ultimately for the students to be successful in the future. And to have for the parents to be more involved with their child's education

★ T: From the beginning of the class to the end How great of an achievement is there? How well do they learn?

★ S: When they first come in? To when they graduate?

★ T: Uh huh.

★ S: It's pretty big. It's pretty big. Um, we test them when they first come in there is a diagnostics test for every student wanting to enter the ESL program takes before the come

in to, and they are scored from 1-6. And a 4, would be a student who is almost fluent and who should be leaving or exiting our program. And many students come in scoring a 1. And they graduate scoring a 4 or a 5. They are ready for college. They are ready for, many go into senior English, their last year and they are able to pass a senior English class which is great. With out any help or any assistance from anyone they are able to pass that class. And our ultimate goal is for them to be in our program for a short period of time. And get enough skills, enough abilities to be able to take all those mainstream classes. Like People in Politics, or Economics. So they can get their degree and graduate. Just like any other main stream student.

- ★ T: I had a friend that came from Guatemala, and when she came here she didn't speak and English. And my other friend actually taught her English by reading her Nursery Rhymes
- ★ S: There you go.
- ★ T: These little tiny kids books. And that's how she learned English. It is kind of amazing that, that's, all it takes. Just a little bit of reading
- ★ S: yeah just a little bit of reading and motivation. You have to want to do it. I know a lot of kids that have been here, a lot of people, adults too, have been here for years and still, they just *wont* learn the language. It's motivation. You have to want to do it.
- ★ T: Well Thank You
- ★ S: Your welcome, Well that was pretty easy.