

My Story: Rose Mary Villanueva

Rose Mary's father was born in 1907 in Jalisco, Mexico. He came to the United States in the 1940s as a bracero, or farm worker. He traveled between Mexico and the United States several times in pursuit of employment. Rose Mary Villanueva was born in Denver, Colorado in 1946. Seven of her siblings were also born in Denver, and five others in Los Angeles. She remembers speaking only Spanish at home.

"... They didn't have bilingual programs so when my brother and I went to first grade, I remember not being able to understand what was going on in class. My father tells me that one day I came home and said, 'I don't want to go back to school anymore,' because I didn't understand what was going on, and I didn't like it. Imagine, me, a teacher now! My mother was bilingual, so little by little she started speaking English to us and at some point we stopped speaking only Spanish and became fluent in English. The three oldest kids -- my brother Rudy, my sister Gloria, and I -- were the only ones to speak Spanish."

The family moved to California in the 1950s when the father found work as a custom tailor. When Rose Mary was a junior in high school, she tried to sign up for a Spanish class, but was told she was ineligible: The class was reserved for students in the college preparatory program -- a program she had never been informed about. Ultimately, one her teachers stepped forward to offer tutoring to Rose Mary and another Latino student, enabling them to prepare for college entrance. Upon her graduation from high school, Rose Mary attended Santa Maria Community College on scholarship. From there she went on to UCLA, graduating in 1971 with a degree in Spanish, and ultimately went on to receive her California teaching certification. She was the only one of her parents' twelve children to graduate from college

In 1973 Rose Mary entered the teaching profession and soon met her husband, Anselmo Villanueva, who is the current director of Community Alliance of Lane County. They were married in 1974. Rose Mary's first teaching job, in Oxnard, California, was a bilingual position. After returning from a trip to Mexico in 1975 Rose Mary worked as a migrant education teacher.

The Villanuevas moved to Eugene in 1979. One of Rose Mary's lasting contributions to the Eugene area has been to organize and establish a local Spanish Catholic Mass. It was held for the first time at the Newman Center at the University of Oregon campus on December 12, 1981, the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe (the Patron Saint of Mexico). Around forty people attended the first celebration.

"When I first moved here Eugene seemed very clean, very pristine, very white, it seemed friendly to me. One thing that impressed me was the few Latino people I would see -- sometimes we my husband and I would make eye contact and would be counting -- you could always count the Latino people on your left hand. Now there are about seven to nine churches that have services in Spanish, different denominations, and a lot of Spanish masses...and the baptisms, there used to be one or two names, now there's ten or more at a time. And many quinceañeras and weddings are celebrated. There is a big community at St. Mary's. There are people from Oaxaca, from Michoacán, Sinaloa, Veracruz... Zapotec, some of them are Mixtec, and many of them are very young families. Now on the Day of the Virgin de Guadalupe we can get up to 500 people or more."

Rose Mary has worked as a bilingual teacher in Eugene at the Buena Vista School and for the Migrant Education Program. She continues to be an advocate for bilingual education.

"I feel like our young people are not able to use their full potential when it is required that they speak only English. There were twelve brothers and sisters in my family and I am the only one who can speak, read, and write Spanish. The rest of them have lost the ability to do that. That's a loss for our communities. People who are bilingual as children -- I don't care if they were bilingual in German or French or whatever -- when they lose their language, they lose their ability to interact with more people and with different cultures. We need to pass our language on to our kids."

Rose Mary feels that as the Latino population has grown, intolerance has grown.

"When I first got here, I don't ever remember anybody saying anything or looking at me, or calling me names. But recently I was walking along the street and I was talking with a friend in Spanish. The person in front of me turned around and said, 'You know, you are in America. Speak English.' I said, 'I thought this was a free country.' And, 'By the way, I am an American citizen.'"