



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK ARTS & HERITAGE PROGRAM

AUDIO TAPE LOG

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Interviewee(s): Isabel Melendez

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Brief summary of tape contents: Interview with Isabel Meléndez, Director of the Spanish Community Program at the Greater Lawrence Community Action Council and founder and the Hispanic Week Festival.

Counter/ABS	Contents
00:00	<p>Ms. Meléndez was married in Puerto Rico and her husband was in the Armed Forces. She had a sister who came to Lawrence before she did. When she married, her husband said to her that they should come to the U.S. Back in Puerto Rico she used to work as a teacher. Her family was humble and poor; of her twelve siblings, she was the only one to attend college. She is originally from Juana Diaz. She didn't finish her studies; in part because of her financial situation and partly because she was offered a job as a teacher, which at the time was one of the few sources of income for her family. Because of her lack of a diploma, school officials would send her to work in the worst places. So when her husband said, let's go to the U.S., she imagined herself with a portfolio, well dressed, as a teacher in front of her class. That was her dream. That was in 1959 and she was 22 years old. She only brought certified grades and some diplomas (for having participated in alphabetization campaigns) and she went to a job agency, thinking that she would be able to work. It didn't turn out that way: they told her that the certifications she brought and her English language skills were not enough. Everything changed and she felt very bad towards her husband for bringing her here. She ended up working as laborer at a shoe factory. It was a very bad time: the odors and the work environment at the factory were not for her. She got depressed; she used to cry a lot and had fights with her husband. Remember, she says, that they come Latin culture and when a woman marries she becomes almost the property of her husband; that was the thinking at the time. She wanted to go back to Puerto Rico, thinking that it could be worst that what she was living in Lawrence. But her husband told her that she couldn't go back, that she was his</p>

wife and she needed to stay with him. She says that if you go today to that building where she worked, you will find her tears sealed in the building, because it was more crying than laughter that she did at the time. The factory was called Lawrence Made, and it was the largest shoe factory in Lawrence at the time. It was located where Cambridge College is located today. Every time that she goes by the building she remembers it: she had many unpleasant experiences there that transformed her life completely. She used to work in a corner of a room from 7am to 4pm, working all day without speaking to anyone. At that time there were only a few Latino families working there. She remembers that she got along with some of the Italian workers but it was different. For example, she used to ask for water, but people didn't understand her Spanish. She was so frustrated that when she arrived home all she could do was fight with her husband. All that sadness and tears served to forge her determination to help others who came to Lawrence not suffer as she had done. She worked at a number of places after that but she never was able to practice her vocation of being a teacher. She worked at a coat factory and that was a little better: she worked as a floor supervisor and was able to make some good friendships with Italian women workers, who happened to speak good English and helped her with her pronunciation. That is how she began to integrate into the community. She had four children and after her last child, that's when she began to establish her first organization.

09:12 The first people that began to arrive from Puerto Rico were from Juana Diaz (her home town). They were attracted by work. At the time Lawrence had a large shoe industry and they needed many workers. They didn't need language or skills; they would be trained in their job. The factory owners would pay \$50 if you brought in a new worker; if you came today you would have a job tomorrow. Two of the main problems today: work and shelter were not a problem then. The factories not only provided work but also shelter, lodging for their workers. Even though when she began to work the pay was \$1 an hour, but there were many jobs available. Just by word of mouth the Latino population grew very quickly and by the 1964 she founded the *Club de Juana Diaz Ausentes* (Club of Juana Diaz Absentees, located at 109 Garden Street in Lawrence), the first Hispanic American organization in Lawrence. In 1967 she founded a softball league. The Club became the preferred place for baptisms, birthdays, and other social occasions. In 1970, she obtained the first license to sell alcoholic beverages at the Club. They didn't make much profit out of it, but it allowed the community to get together and celebrate *parrandas* [street reveling, though as we'll see below it did not involve activities in the street] for Christmas, as well as Mothers Day and other events. There were musicians at the time that would play the seis. She remembers that in 1967 she organized a softball league with her husband and that they did their first *parada* (parade). It was quite an event, the first event of its type in Lawrence, and people (the rest of the English-speaking community) didn't know what was going on. Asked whether *parrandas* were done in public as they are in Puerto Rico, she answers that of course not; they were performed indoors. She remembers that a cousin of hers came visiting from Puerto Rico at that time and he had brought his guitar and was singing *aguinaldos* [literally meaning "gift," a type of Christmas carol structured in octosyllabic quatrains] at her doorstep. Soon after, the police arrived and told him to stop: he didn't know that it was not allowed. According to Ms. Melendez, they did celebrate *parrandas* at home at sometimes the police came to make them stop, probably after receiving complaints from neighbors.

- 14:50 In 1970 she opened a clothing store, Casa Melendez, at 115 Newbury Street. She had some 300-400 customers. She purchased the clothes with cash and then sold *fiado* (on credit). She remembers going to New York to purchase the clothing and then returning at night. At the time, people didn't have credit card, so the shop became to "people's home": she remembers giving out clothes if someone passed away, or when people were cold she would give them a sweater. As with the Club, she never made money at it. She remembers that she would make corrections to the clothes if the customer needed it. In other ways, the shop was "the people's office": she remembers that if someone arrived in town she would close the store at night and then go help him look for work. That's how she became know to local employers and service agencies. She introduced many job seekers to Rayton, AT&T, and other businesses in the area. Needless to say, the shop didn't last very long (1970-73).
- 17:30 In 1967, the Community Action Council was going to open an office to assist Latinos coming to work in Lawrence. She applied to the position but CAC gave it to a man. She recalls that men were favored at that time. At the time human services work on a yearly budget period and men, always wanting more job security, didn't last. She reapplied five times to the position and was denied it, until 1973, when she was given the position of director of the Spanish Community Program, position that she holds to this day. The job involved helping identify Latino arrivals and their needs and serving as intermediary with them; it was a growing population. Before her tenure, the director were an executive position, but she wanted to work and have close communication with her clients. She recalls that once a week she would go to the "projects" [public housing] to identify Latino residents. She has worked in this position for 32 years.
- 20:09 In 1979, the Club closed and she divorced in 1980, partly due to her dedication to the community. She began with Hispanic Week in 1979; she was so devoted to the project that she forgot about herself, about her family, about everything. She lost her marriage and in 1980 she divorced. She continued with her work at the Spanish Community Program and established a yearly Christmas celebration, *Fiesta de los Niños* (Children's Party). She recalls that when she was a child, she didn't have any receive nice toys or anything, and after seeing so many Hispanic children in that situation, she organized the event. She began with 50 children; it now provides toys for 1200. The event is the largest children event and receives donations.
- 22:15 In 1979, she founded Hispanic Week. At that time there were people coming from other nations, other communities, but there was still the perception that those that spoke Spanish we were all Puerto Ricans. There were Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Colombians, and more and more Dominicans. She remembers visiting the Boston Puerto Rican Festival with Cuban and Guatemalan friends. At the stage, she remembers feeling offended when the announcer at the festival asked those from Puerto Rico to raise their hand. She remembers not doing so out of respect for her friends. She remembers thinking of establishing a Hispanic festival in Lawrence where everyone could raise their hand and Americans would know that they speak the same language but have different cultures. So she contacted the city major about organizing and event that would serve to promote Hispanic culture but would also serve to educate Americans about the diversity of countries represented in Lawrence. The major approved of the project. With the help of Jeff Morales and Carlos Ruiz she organized the festival with a month's time. At the time, the Campagnon Park was not used for public events, so she had to convince the city council to approve it, mainly by arguing that in Hispanic countries the

plaza was the main public space for families to gather. She remembers being told to “go back to Puerto Rico” and being the victim of prejudice, discrimination, and humiliation, but she ignored it because she knew she was going to stay and live in Lawrence. In order to do the festival she had to go to City Hall with 100 demonstrators in order to obtain the resources they needed; the police was lining up the building, but she had prepared the demonstrators to be peaceful. She notes that she had the support of the Major and a city alderman, William Wall. He was an elected official and later became representative. During the first five years Americans didn’t attend the event; somehow there was a sense of fear that something bad was going to happen. But the event was full of culture: each country had their own kiosk representing their traditions. She remembers bringing a number of groups from Puerto Rico, Argentina, Dominican Republic, and Chile; there were representatives from Guatemala, Ecuador, etc. One year, she tried to get the City to approve voter registration during the Festival but they did not want to let them. They had to take the city to court in order to get them to give permission. Over those five years, a number of agencies began to participate and slowly the City began to attend. Since then, the park was open to various events: Italians, Irish, and other groups began to do concerts and other events.

30:00 Ms. Melendez talks about each country’s “nights” and how they attract people from Boston, Connecticut, New Hampshire. Moreover, some of the events bring artists from abroad. Thus, the Hispanic Week provides stimulates and developed the local artistic and cultural environment: youth want to participate and present their work; young girls that participate in the pageant, for example, have demonstrated incredible talent. She discusses a young female trumpet player that played beautifully, so delicately. That’s way I think that Hispanic Week is one of the most important projects that I have developed, because it has lasted and has served as a stimulus to many other communities in the region.

32:20 Asked what have been the biggest challenges, Ms. Melendez notes that the board of directors for Hispanic Week changes every year. There has been a much change, in part because of the growth of the event. Today it is a much more commercialized; that was not the original idea. The focus was more on cultural presentations and opportunities for non-profit organizations to sell food and other things. Now it is more commercial. When asked why is this the case, Ms. Melendez notes that the costs of the event have gone up substantially: police and security, cleanup, electricity, etc. add up to some \$85,000 or more today. Initially, Hispanic Week got most of its funding in the form of donations and some of the orchestras would donate their performances. A crew of volunteers handled cleanup. This is not case today, in part because of unemployment. Now everyone expects to be paid for his services. So now the organizers charge for the cost of vending spaces and that helps to defray some of the costs. Even local groups have to confront increasing production costs. A local dance troupe now pays \$600 just to be able to have a space to rehearse; if they perform three dances, then they have to come up with funding to cover three changes in costuming. In order to attract more audience—including visitors from out of town, organizers need to secure sponsors to underwrite more established groups. For example, Saturday night performances underwritten by Power 800AM; while Sunday night performances were underwritten y Mega 890AM. The organizers of the Hispanic Week present Friday’s night performances. The afternoon events are still more in line with was done in the past: presentations of local groups such as Raíces de Ecuador, Taller Borinqueño, Movimiento Puertorriqueño, etc. The main sources of income for the event includes advertising in the Festival Booklet (see CF-04-18-M, which

includes full page ads for Cambridge College, Central Catholic High School, Century 21, Telemundo, Univision, Lawrence General Hospital, R&R Financial Advisor, and Budweiser); sales of booth space; and beer sales (sold across the street from the park). Insurance is a considerable expense. Last year, the event ended having a deficit; this year the situation may be remedied by the donation of food by various Latino restaurants to the VIP Luncheon (cost last year was some \$6,000).

38:00 Asked about the changes in Puerto Rican culture in Lawrence over the last thirty years, Ms. Melendez indicates that it has changed so much. It had been "down" or depressed for some time but is now making a comeback. She turn has occurred thanks to the creation of new "folclorico" groups, such as Taller Borinqueño, the Batuteras, and other groups, such as a "tipica" music ensemble that is now beginning to play. The music was being forgotten, partly because of the influence of other Latino music such as bachata and the merengue, which were dominating the scene. Right now Dominicans have not only outnumbered Puerto Ricans but they are also more powerful in socioeconomic terms. Salsa and *plena* are less and less heard in Lawrence today; what you hear is merengue and bachata. There is no school in Lawrence where Puerto Rican culture is preserved; all of the schools are focused on Dominican culture. 4

40:40 Regarding the socioeconomic status of Puerto Ricans vs. Dominicans, Ms. Melendez believes that the majority of Puerto Ricans that come to Lawrence are people who have little opportunities to advance in the Island, not the professionals who stay there; in contrast, the Dominicans that come to Lawrence are professionals who are seeking to expand opportunities. In her case, Ms. Melendez believes that perhaps if she had stayed in Puerto Rico, she may have had the opportunity to advance within the Department of Education. Instead, she came to Lawrence and became stifled and unable to advance. She was the first Latina to enter Northern Essex Community College to sign up for typing lessons, but she was unable to continue her studies because of her work in the community. She couldn't do it; she didn't have the time. Dominicans that come to Lawrence come under different circumstances: they are professionals who leave DR "obligated" [by a limited job market and opportunities for advancement].

43:00 Asked about ways that City could support their work, Ms. Melendez says that the community needs a school that is not identified with a single culture, but that is open to all. She notes that Lawrence has the resources and talent. Also, there are a number of groups—including Raíces de Ecuador, Association of Peruvians United, and Taller Borinqueño—which would thrive if they had the space to develop their work. The city lacks a performance space where groups can present their work. Building the technical capacity of local organizations is another area in which the City could play a role. Ms. Melendez notes that many organizations don't have the non-profit organizations status—including the Hispanic Week festival. They are run as an all-volunteer organization. For example, Comcast offered to support a number of groups in Lawrence, but they needed a fiscal sponsor for the program. GLCAC is serving as the conduit for the grants. Another example is Voters in Action (Ms. Melendez' current project). She is in the process of writing a grant request for funding. The city is now providing them with the space to carry out voter registration, but they will have to raise funds through raffles and the like in order to meet the rent for July. GLCAC now covers mailings, telephone, etc. ✓

50:00 She discusses the Roberto Clemente Baseball League (another GLCAC program). Established in 1992, the League now has some 250 children ages 9 through 15

participating in the program. The program includes anti-drug program. She notes that the League travels to Boston for friendship matches and participates in the Hispanic Week parade.

51:40 Although she's retired from the Hispanic Week organization, she continues to provide advice to them when needed. Another program she continues to be involved in is the Voters in Action and the radio program "La Voz del Pueblo" (The Voice of the People), which started six years ago. She provides public service announcements for community events, as well as finds solutions to personal needs (she gives examples such as providing a wheelchair or a bed to someone that needs it; raising funds for funerary services; and even for international catastrophes in Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Venezuela). Another thing she has done is provides contact information for City offices in charge of electricity, waste management, etc. She stays away from partisan politics and personal attacks. Finally she indicates that she is planning to continue her work with the Voters in Action program and that she has several young women involved in the project and she wants to see it on its way before letting them take it over. With regards to the baseball league, she was able to secure \$100,000 from the City—from a \$200,000 proposal—for the construction of a baseball field on the northwest corner of the Campagnone Park. She anticipates beginning the work on the field after the Hispanic Week events and to have it completed by next year.

55:00 [Franceska Reynoso, together with Manny Reynoso, served as stage managers for the Hispanic Week Festival]. Ms. Reynoso identified some of the ensembles that performed during the Saturday event: Arlington School, Iglesia Presbiteriana, Batutas del Movimiento Puertorriqueño, Lawrence Ballet Academy, Real Latin Flavor, Juan Papito, and several artists presented by Silva Productions, including Nero (a rapper), DJ Loss, Así Canta La Montaña (a salsa band from Puerto Rico), La Orquesta de El Salvador, El Chaval de la Bachata.

Nestor
Rentas 56:30 [Brief interview with Nestor Rentas]. Born in the Barrio Muelas, Sitio Piedra Aguzada of Juana Díaz, Mr. Rentas has been living in the U.S. since 1979. He first came to New Jersey and then to Bronx. He began selling small souvenirs in the streets and eventually established a small family business called Estrella Records. In time, and in order to identify the business with the sale of souvenirs, he changed the name of the store to Borinquen Records. They began to sell flags and crafts. He now travels to different states to sell his crafts at fairs and festivals, including Lowell, Holyoke, Boston, Newark and Bridgeport (NJ), and in the Bronx. Some of his crafts are made by artisans in Puerto Rico, while others are designed in Puerto Rico but made in Taiwan or China. The latter products are less expensive and are easier to sell. One of the items made in Puerto Rico is the map of Puerto Rico, ornamented in various ways. The base is made in wood, laminated and mounted with pieces, some with rice or other grains (made in Puerto Rico), others with figurines made in China or Taiwan. Items that sell the most include the tee shirts, "duras" (small hats), the flags, and necklaces. Other items include ornamental CDs with the Puerto Rican colors, stuffed "coquí" (a type of tree frog from Puerto Rico) animals, key holders, "tablillas" (automobile license plates), and flags of various Puerto Rican provinces, such as Ponce and Lares. Some items are made in the Bronx. Mr. Rentas also sells guiros, a type of calabash that is used as a musical instrument.

1:02:10 He is a trovador (singer of décima) and began to sing in school at the age of 8. He began to sing with a group early on and for many years he participated in various the *barriadas* (neighborhood events) in Puerto Rico; La Perla de Ponce (the Pearl

of Ponce) Theater, The Tío Carlitos (Uncle Charlie) television program, Hugito Morales (who was Mayor of Ponce during that time), and Ulises Tirado's program La Ruleta Musical. He also performed during the Christmas season with the Hermanos Irizarry, producers of a radio program in south Ponce. When he arrived in New Jersey, he made contact with Yomo Toro—the King of the Puerto Rican Cuatro—and other artists such as Nieves Quintero, Maestro Ladi, and Roque Navarro. Mr. Rentas states that Yomo Toro internationalized the cuatro as an instrument by performing it with Willie Colon and Hector Lavoe. Through Yomo Toro, who connected him with Sico Records, Mr. Rentas was able to produce a record of his singing. His focus is on *aguinaldo*, *décima*, *séis chorreado*, *aguinaldo jíbaro*, *trulla* and other genres, including adaptations such as *séis milonga*. He does not participate in *controversias* (décima contests); he mostly sings other artists songs and poetry, although he has composed a few of his own. Their store is located at 855 Tremont Avenue in Bronx, NY 10460.

- 1:06:30 He notes that every year there is something new that comes out, for example a Puerto Rican flag that lights up or baby pacifiers with lights. Other items include chairs and hammocks from Puerto Rico, but those are harder to sell in this kind of setting. He tries to focus on items that cost \$3, \$5, \$10 or \$20.
- 1:07:55 Asked since when has he begun to see products manufactured outside Puerto Rico, he says that four years ago he was able to sell things faster. He speculates that *las guerras* (“the wars”) and or the economic situation are restricting sales. Even though the music is joyful, the sales are not good. Asked whether the country of production influences people's decision to buy or not, Mr. Rentas notes that flags have been made in China for many years. And there are people who when they see the tags they complain. He says that there is a place, Lares, where he knows they make flags, and even though they sell it in the province they don't produce them in masse. He also points to the limited machinery and the high cost of labor as possible factors that make it more expensive to produce the flags in Puerto Rico. Not being able to compete internationally, Puerto Rican artists market their work from town to town. He discusses the Fiesta de Reyes (Three Kings Festival) in Juana Díaz (January 6), during which craftsmen create and sell carved wooden statues of the Three Kings, made in different sizes. A five-inch set of figurines might cost \$40-50. Those that buy them know their artistic value. He quickly adds that he can't buy such items and bring them to the U.S. because no one would pay what they are worth. His focus is on items that sell.
- 1:15:05 Mr. Rentas proceeds to show me some of the handmade necklaces that sell at \$3 and notes they sell at about \$8 in Puerto Rico. He and members of his family import the materials and make the necklaces themselves. Other items, such as some of the braided hats are made in Thailand, while others are brought from Mexico and Haiti.
- 1:17:25 Mr. Nestor believes that the cost of the booth space is reasonable and comparable to other places. He understands that the fees help pay for security and insurance. How well they do really depends on the economy and how much people buy. He likes to participate legally in the festival, and complains of some people that come and set up their exhibits without permission. He notes that he always travels with his family and sometimes with friends. He says that the last four years haven't been good, in part because of bad weather over the Festival weekend. This year has been better.
- 1:19:50 Asked about the situation of artisans in Puerto Rico, Mr. Nestor explains that most artisans in Puerto Rico are focused on more expensive work, work that they can get a better return for, even if they need to wait a bit more in order to sell it.

He has seen that artisans will position their products in airports, beaches, and other places where tourists go. He has also seen that some furniture stores will have crafts from local artists on display.

1:22:16