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Collecting Voices

BY BELINDA ACOSTA

When journalism professor Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez first conceived of the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project, she thought they might collect about 200 narratives. "We were overwhelmed with the response," she says. Interviews conducted at veterans centers and other locations all across the country came pouring in. And it wasn't just veterans stepping forward. There was always someone, an interviewer or a friend, who would offer, "You know, I have a *tio* you should talk to." Today, at least 500 interviews have been collected. More come in weekly, thanks to online instructions on how to conduct an interview. (www.utexas.edu/projects/latinoarchives)



The drive to tell their stories, Rivas-Rodriguez suspects, is because of two things. First, the declining health of the aging World War II population makes them conscious of the need to capture these testimonies in an organized way. Second, "This is an era where people took things in stride. Many were poor, and hardship was a normal part of life," she says. "Our generation is prone to be more public. They generally believed it was unseemly to call attention to themselves. I don't believe they realized the remarkable journey of their lives and the contribution they made. But when they tell these stories, we're just blown away."

The project has the distinction of including not just the histories of Latinos at war, but Latinas on the home front – wives, mothers, and sisters, many of whom found themselves entering the workforce outside the home and taking on the role of breadwinner for the first time in their lives. "Since the beginning, I've always felt that those stories were an important part of the social history, what was going on in the social sphere, as well as on the front line," says Rivas-Rodriguez. "I don't know of another project doing it in this way."

"The fact that they were Latino stories made it interesting to me because it's less documented," says Jennifer Lindgren, a reporter for Sherman, Texas, CBS affiliate KXII-TV, who conducted interviews in 2002 while a student of Rivas-Rodriguez's. Although Lindgren grew up in Dallas, she knew little about Latinos in Texas. Because the interviews lasted as long as two hours, "told at their own pace, you really got to know their experience," she says. "You always hear the big stories. But these were intimate, sometimes heartwarming stories that were emotional in the smallest way. It's something that's stayed with me more than any other experience."

While the initial push to collect interviews is over, the work of the project is far from finished. Currently, a compilation of narratives is being prepared for a new book, *A Legacy Greater Than Words: Stories of U.S. Latinos & Latinas of the WWII Generation*, forthcoming from UT Press. "What Maggie has done with this project is a great service to the veterans," says 84-year-old Virgilio Roel, a Laredo native, now retired in Austin, whose story is among those collected. "I think they have a better view of themselves, an improved value of their contribution," he says.

While Rivas-Rodriguez has similar oral history projects in mind for the future, she estimates that the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project will keep her busy for the next six to 10 years.

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