

**A Study of Southern Arizona
Mexican American Elderly**

**With focus on learning about perspectives
Of women involving end of life issues,
Growing old, grief, and death**

By Rose L. Madrid

EL RIO NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER

The El Rio Neighborhood Center is located in the Barrio Anita on West Speedway and Riverview Drive. The center serves a large population in the west side of Tucson. It offers many services to Tucson residents, such as, GED classes, English learning classes, Computer labs, legal services for immigration issues, day care for pre-school and after school care for older children and of course the Senior Activity center.

The program is funded by Tucson Parks and Recreation, as well as Pima Council on Aging. People may attend the center one day a week or the whole week, Monday through Friday. Most participants are transported by a special Tucson City van. Very few of the attendees drive their own vehicle. The hours are from 8:30 am to 12:30. The majority eat a snack when they arrive and have a lunch at noon provided by Pima Council on Aging. They pay a minimal amount for the food but if a person can't afford the amount they still get served.

The senior program offers an array of services such as nutrition classes, arts and crafts, memory games, field trips, and Bingo games. What I observed is that the participants faithfully attend almost every day for the purpose of socializing and camaraderie. Most participants live alone. A few of the ladies live with their grown children. In some cases, the adult children work outside the home; therefore the ladies have a need to attend the Senior Activity Center or become isolated.

The center has close to 90 persons registered in the program. However, the average daily attendance is about 60 to 70 individuals. Only about 9 men attend on a regular basis. Almost all the participants are 62 years of age and older. About 90 percent receive a monthly Social Security check.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The purpose of the investigation was to learn the attitudes and perspectives of Mexican-American women in regard to end-of-life issues. As well, also to learn the cultural values in death and dying issues. After discussing the matter with the Senior Activity Center director, she recommended five women and gave me their names. In a private room away from the Center, I spoke to each woman privately and explained what the study was about. Two women declined and three agreed. All three women signed the consent to be interviewed form. The following week I proceeded to meet individually with each one. The sessions sometimes took longer than one hour because each woman relished the opportunity to have someone listen to their conversation. I constantly had to get them back on track and continue with the subject at hand. The interviewing method consisted of note-taking. I was surprised that the ladies refused to allow me to take their pictures.

All total, I conducted three conversations with two of the women. I had one conversation only with one of the women. The two women were eager to share personal information. The third woman selected, after one meeting, told me she did not want to participate because my focus on end of life issues was a subject she chose not to talk about.

INTERVIEWER'S INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS WITH PARTICIPANTS

On a couple of occasions I was invited to have coffee with several groups of attendees at the center. Very informally, I asked how they liked coming to the program. They all agreed that being there was like being with their other family. When asked why they had started attending, again the consensus was because they live alone or else if they live with family, family members go to work and they are left alone.

I moved to another table and asked the same questions and the answers were almost identical to the previous. After circulating and spending time at different tables, I felt assured that this senior group totally fills a need that most older people have, which is one of spending time with peers and not having to be at home in front of the television set. Their time spent there does not allow for feelings of isolation or depression.

Interview with Yolanda M. on September 23, 2014

Yolanda is a 72 year old woman who lives in Tucson but was born in a small village near Imuris in Mexico. The lady was meticulously well groomed, very fashionable. She has lived in Tucson for 25 years and is presently living with a daughter.

Yolanda's husband died 16 years ago. Unclear as to the cause of death as the lady veered into a different conversation. (Interviewer will follow up on that topic next session) The lady says she had a two year courtship with her husband and married him at age 17. She says she had a good marriage, her husband was kind. They had 5 children, two of whom live in Tucson and the other three live in Mexico. She never worked outside the home and although she was 56 years old when husband died she lived comfortably receiving an income from businesses husband had in Mexico.

In the last few years Yolanda has done volunteer work at elementary schools in the Southside of Tucson and also at El Rio Neighborhood center. The past three years she no longer is volunteering and is now attending the center as a member. Yolanda owns a car and still drives, however at times she takes public transportation to save on gasoline.

The lady says she thoroughly enjoys coming to the center 3-4 times a week. She enjoys the activities, such as Mexican Bingo (Loteria), doing exercises and eating the good food that is served there at lunch time.

She also reports that once she gets home she rests until she goes to pick up grandson from school at 3 pm. She then cooks dinner for her daughter and grandchild. She cooks traditional food such as, pozole, meats, beans, and makes tortillas. Cooking at home is one of her favorite things to do.

Impression:

Yolanda is a very pleasant lady to talk to. She seemed to be really enjoying telling me about her life in Mexico, details of her family, and just plain talking non-stop. She kept telling me that in Mexico she and her husband were rather well-to-do. Even though she travels to Mexico quite often, she is always happy to return to Tucson. Presently she seems satisfied with her daily life and plans to live here for the rest of her life.

R.M.

Interview scheduled with Yolanda M. on September 30, 2014

Interviewer approached subject to direct her to the meeting room where we had been meeting.

The lady took me by surprise when she told me she did not want to be interviewed---much less about death. I asked her why she felt that way and she responded by telling me that that subject was too private. She said she was over the sorrow of losing her husband and did not want to "revive" the issue.

I thanked her for the first interview and her being honest with me about the subject.

**SOUTHWEST FOLKLIFE ALLIANCE
END OF LIFE PROJECT**

CONSENT TO BE INTERVIEWED

I am aware that my participation in this interview is voluntary.

I received an explanation about the intent and purpose of this research.

I am supportive of the values of this research in our community.

If, for any reason, at any time, I wish to stop the interview, I may do so without having to give an explanation.

The researcher has explained that personal or family issues related to illness, death, grief and other matters with emotional content, will be discussed. I understand the risk that talking about some of these topics may upset me.

I am aware that the data collected through this interview will be used in a project by the Southwest Folklife Alliance to share with others facing end of life issues as well as with the public at large in publications, talks and other educational settings.

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should be treated as confidential and my personal identity shall not be revealed (use of a fictitious name is fine);

can be shared and attributed directly to me and my identity and family's identity can be revealed.

If I have any questions about this study, I am free to contact Dr. Maribel Alvarez (520) 621-4046 for more information.

I have read the above form and, with the understanding that I can withdraw at any time and for whatever reason, I consent to participate in today's interview.

Malanda Mason
Participant's Name

[Signature]
Participant's Signature

23-9-14
Date

Interview with Margaret F. on September 23, 2014

This lady is a 73 year old woman, who was born in Hayden, AZ. Parents moved to Tucson when she was 6 years old. She attended local schools and completed the 11th grade at Tucson High. She dropped out because she got pregnant. Margaret lives alone at Chicano Por La Causa apartments. She has lived there for 11 years. She went to live with a daughter and grandson for 1 year but prefers living alone. She says she loves being a in a community setting and at the same time likes to be alone in her apartment.

Margaret has 6 children, 20 grandchildren and 9 great grandchildren. She says she sees them often and feels close to them. Her face lit up when she was telling me about her children.

Margaret was married for 8 years, had 4 children and due to basic differences she and husband divorced in a congenial agreement. Later on she met a man at a dance and married for second time. She gave birth to two more children. She and her husband got along well. He accepted the 4 children from her previous marriage. She describes her marriage of 29 years as being a comfortable one. She regrets that her husband, after being diagnosed with cancer died. (I don't know how long ago he died)

Margaret worked at St. Mary's Hospital as a nursing assistant and later on at a nursing home. This last job she liked because she had longer relationships with the patients. Margaret enrolled at Senior Corp nine years ago which is a program for displaced homemakers. She still attends classes and helps orient new members. She receives a small stipend. She was referred by that organization to El Rio Center and is one of the food servers in the kitchen. She says she loves the job. She also enjoys the activities at the center, such as Bingo, exercise class but mostly enjoys the socialization with other attendees. She does not drive but takes the Sun Van or a city bus to the center or wherever she needs to go.

When she goes home she enjoys reading and says she is an avid reader. She takes the bus to different theaters to watch movies. She says she doesn't cook at her apartment. But does cook when she visits with family.

Margaret says she is close to her children and is proud of them. Four of them attended college and have professional jobs. Her two sons work in construction jobs.

Impressions:

This lady is pleasant to talk to and was willing to answer and explain situations in her life. This lady is very gracious. She seems content with her station in life. Likes going to the center, going to see movies by herself, and seems satisfied with her living arrangements. A very well adjusted lady.

Interview with Margaret F. on September 30, 2014

Margaret came to the interviewing room, which is away from the activity room. She did not wait for me to go and get her. She was pleasant and eager to talk.

I told her I wanted to thank her for trusting me and added that I feel I know her a little better. We reviewed what she talked about during the last session, which was mostly about her family, her marriage and her perspectives regarding being of older age.

I told Margaret that today we needed to talk about the losses in her life. She became teary-eyed and I assured her that all she had to do was raise her hand and we would stop the interview. She said she was okay.

She went on to tell me that she was the caregiver for her husband who had prostate cancer. He was being treated at the Veteran's Hospital and after surgery the cancer spread throughout his body. Her husband refused chemotherapy and radiation and said he wanted to die in peace. He lived another 4 years after the surgery and they both accepted the Hospice Home services. Her daughters assisted with the care of their father so that she could grocery shop or go to the movies. Towards the end when her husband was very ill, the Hospice and the Red Cross arranged for her daughter who was in the Army to fly home from Hawaii to be with her Dad.

Margaret's husband only wish was to be allowed to die at home with his family. She says she spent many hours by his side and they asked each other for forgiveness for any bad actions or thoughtless, hurtful things that they could have inflicted.

Years before the couple left the Catholic Church and joined a Protestant church. Therefore, a lady pastor would come on a regular basis to pray with her and her husband.

As her husband became more ill, she and her children were present at all times. They prayed together. One morning Margaret's husband died at 6:00 am. She and her daughter held him until his last breath.

Soon after husband's diagnosis, on her birthday, her husband asked her what gift she wanted. She told him burial insurance. He was surprised, but agreeable to the idea and a few days later a mortuary representative came to their house and arrangements were made, including a plot at the cemetery. He thought it was a bizarre gift that she had asked for but agreed nonetheless.

Her daughters were in charge of making all the final arrangements.

There was no mass or services in a Catholic Church which she missed very much when faced with the death. Her husband was taken directly from the funeral home to the cemetery. There was a split within the family in regard to their leaving the Church. The children remained Catholics and she believes that they made the decision to not have Protestant services. After the burial, a luncheon was held at the church's clubhouse which meant a lot to Margaret. This was an opportunity to grieve with her family and especially with some women who were members of the church.

Margaret says she missed her husband terribly. All her children returned to their homes to carry on with their jobs and their families. Consequently she grieved alone in her house privately. She says that was fine with her. She refused to wear a black dresses in the "Luto" tradition because she was already

so sad. She says she almost drowned in her tears for two years. It wasn't until later when her daughter took her on a vacation to Hawaii which she enjoyed very much. When she returned she says she was almost over the loss of her husband and went to work as a nursing assistant at St. Mary's Hospital for a while. She subsequently joined the Senior Corp.—a program for displaced homemakers. She helps train other women and receives a small stipend. Somehow she was assigned to El Rio Center, which she likes very much.

Margaret says she still misses her husband. She says she goes to the cemetery at least 4 to 5 times a year to take him silk flowers to his tomb. And on the Dia de Los Muertos on November 1, she honors him by taking a pumpkin "empanada" and sweetbread and placing them on the tomb which is an ancient custom.

Margaret has returned to the Catholic Church and seems happy about it.

Interview with Margaret F. on October 14, 2014

Interviewer asked several open-ended questions about “curanderismo” and Margaret just kept shaking her head meaning no. But she did volunteer information not in regard to illness or death of husband. She went on to tell me about her mother and grandmother who did seek the help of a curandero (healer).

She elaborated that when her mother developed arthritis on both knees she sought a man—a curandero in Tucson, who would give her a massage and recite prayers. This man also gave her mother herbal teas to drink at night and suggested the use of VICKS vapor rub on hurting joints. Her mother would not consent to having a knee replacement surgery. The mother years later died of a stroke. When I asked Margaret if she ever considered seeking the help of a curandero for her husband’s ills. She said no and that her husband did not believe in such a practice. Besides, she added, her adult children would not have condoned such a thing. They called that “voodoo”.

The discussion ended up being about remedies that she used on her children, especially when they were infants. These remedies were learned from her grandmother and mother and in all probability were handed down by curanderos or healers through the ages.

She elaborated on the remedies she practiced. For example:

1. Using warm olive oil with “ruda” to cure an earache.
2. Heating olive oil with cloves of fresh garlic to rub on child’s stomach to alleviate colic.
3. Swinging a baby by his/her feet to raise the fontanel on top of head when child is dehydrated.
4. Last, but not least, she used VICKS vapor rub to massage the back, chest and limbs to soothe a common cold and open up the sinuses.

She says she never attributed these maladies to any curses or evil spirits. She practiced these remedies because they worked. For more serious ailments and illnesses she always sought the expertise of a medical doctor.

**SOUTHWEST FOLKLIFE ALLIANCE
END OF LIFE PROJECT**

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Margarit Figueroa Margarit Figueroa
Participant's Name Participant's Signature

9/23/2014
Date

Interview with Sally C. on Sept. 23rd at 9:00 am at El Rio Neighborhood.

We sat at a long table across from each other situated in a big conference room.

I explained to Sally the nature of the project and how important it is learn about diverse cultural groups—attitudes, traditions and attitudes. She listened closely. When I handed her the consent form she signed it right away.

She told me that she was born in Tucson 71 years ago. Attended Flowing Wells High School, dropped out from the 11th grade. Later on she got her GED; subsequently took classes at Pima Community College.

She said she has lived in Tucson all her life with the exception of 8 years that she lived in Georgia with her husband whom she met at the old County Hospital. The marriage lasted for 20 years. Later on, after divorce, she married a man in Tucson. This man was physically abusive and she divorced him. She said she doesn't want people at the center to know that she is a "divorcee" because it has a negative connotation. She tells people she is a widow.

She had 2 sons while in Georgia and 2 more sons in Tucson from her second husband. The two younger sons live in Tucson; however, she is not close to them. One of them lives next door to her and has a wife and three children. She says she has no attachment to them because daughter doesn't like her. I asked why and she said, "I don't know but I think it's because I talk too much." All total she has 18 grandchildren but not close to any of them. Fifteen grandchildren live in Georgia.

After her first marriage ended she became the caregiver for her mother. She took care of her for 20 years. It was during this time that she entered PROJECT AYUDA, which she explained is a program for displaced homemakers. She worked at a Junior High library but didn't like that job because she felt isolated. From there she was referred to the El Rio program. She has been attending the center for 5 years and says she loves it because of the socialization aspect. She admits that she suffers from loneliness. She added that at one time she loved to dance and would love to meet a man to keep her company but NOT for sex!

So after she goes home from the center she takes care of her house, which she owns. She waters her plants, cleans her house and sometimes if any of the ladies need transportation to a doctor or grocery store she'll jump in the car and drive them. She drives her own little car except when she is low on gas. Then she calls the City's Handi-car.

She cooks very little at home and when she does cook the traditional Mexican dishes her son and family won't eat it because the food's too rich. So most of the time, she skips cooking and ends up having a snack while watching TV and before her bedtime.

MY IMPRESSIONS:

This lady does not look her stated age. She demonstrates immense energy and is very talkative. She engaged with me immediately and seems very down-to-earth.

At times she did let her guard down and admitted that she is very lonely. She is active at the center and interacts with other attendees. She is gregarious and quite pleasant.

Rose Madue

Interview with Sally C. on Sept. 30, 2014 at El Rio Neighborhood Center

Sally was eagerly awaiting my visit. She was serving snacks when I entered the activity room but was allowed to leave. She lead me to a separate room where we sat down to talk.

Briefly we talked about the last session which was mostly to establish rapport. I told her that I felt like I knew her better after that first encounter where we talked about family, being at the center and her loneliness.

I told her that today we would talk about the losses in her life. Sally told me she was the caregiver for her mother after she left her husband of 20 years. When she did remarry, she and husband lived with her mother and they both shared the care and tending of the mother.

But then when husband left she said she dedicated herself to just be with the mother at all times. Mother had had a stroke and had become partially paralyzed. Her mother was 83 years old when she died in 2007. She was in a rehabilitation center the last month and died there. Sally says she visited every single day and would recite the rosary on a daily basis, which seemed to comfort the Mother and herself. She added that once her mother died she felt lost and very lonely. Her only sister didn't help out or understand her grief.

Sally's Mother had no end of life wishes but did state that she didn't want to be put on a machine with tubes (life support.)

As for the burial arrangements, Sally's oldest son was helpful. He made the arrangements at the mortuary and paid the expenses. The burial plot was purchased many years ago by Sally's father. She had a "novenario" said at her mother's house. And for 9 days several ladies gathered in the evening to recite a rosary for her mother's repose. On the last evening, refreshments were served.

Following that she was overcome with grief and had no close friends to comfort her. She said she never wore the traditional black dress, "luto", for any length of time. Although she knows that is the custom but didn't want to do it. She added sadly, that the "luto" was and still is in her heart.

As we were closing the conversation, she added that her two ex- husbands are still alive and will not lose any tears when they die!!

Rose Madrid

Interview with Sally C. on October 14, 2014

It was difficult to get the interview started because participant wanted to chat about her new male friend. After listening for a few minutes, I asked her to tell me about any experiences she may have had with "curandero" (healer) practices. She shook her head but then told me about her mother going to Cananea, Sonora, Mexico to seek the services of a curandero for her aches and pains. She would not elaborate the treatments per se but said that her mother used to think that any aches and pains were brought on by evil spirits (punishment?). Eventually, her mother improved with the help of a medical doctor. Sally said that she herself does not believe in folk healing.

However, she added, comically, that if she could have found a healer to put a curse on her two husbands she would have done so. I reminded her that curanderos are healers and not witches or evil-doers. She said, "Never mind."

When asked what, if any remedies were handed down to her by her mother she said no. She said she didn't want any ideas or beliefs interfering with the care of her children.

I thanked Sally for her contributions and that I will be returning to the activity center to acquaint myself with other ladies.

Los Medios

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END OF LIFE PROJECT**

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Sally Camacho
Participant's Name

Sally Camacho
Participant's Signature

9/23/14
Date

