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Guadalupe Speaks Oral History Project

Interview with: Mary Harris

Interviewed by: Stevie Ruiz

(**affiliation**) _____

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About the Guadalupe Speaks Project

Guadalupe Speaks is an oral history project that is part of California Stories, a multiyear initiative designed to strengthen communities and connect Californians by uncovering personal and community stories that help document multicultural communities in present day California. California Stories is funded by the California Council for the Humanities.

In 2003, the Guadalupe Speaks project began recording and transcribing oral histories of the residents of Guadalupe. The stories reflect the history and culture of the town, capturing the residents' impressions of their community. The stories represent the multicultural backgrounds of the residents including Swiss-Italian, Portuguese, Filipino, Chumash, Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese ancestry.

Situated approximately ten miles west of Santa Maria on historic Highway 1 on the border of Santa Barbara & San Luis Obispo counties, the City of Guadalupe was founded in 1843 as one of the earliest communities on the Central Coast. In 2003, the city has a population of 5,700, mixed with long-time and native residents, recent retirees from outside the county, and a large Latino population.

Guadalupe was once the principal agricultural center of northern Santa Barbara County, at one time providing one-third of all lettuce grown in California. Although it is still primarily an agricultural community, the crops have changed to include broccoli, cauliflower, carrots and other vegetables. However, Guadalupe is no longer the central distribution point for the area, and communities such as Santa Maria have surpassed it in growth by almost 2,000 percent. Guadalupe has remained at a standstill, much as it was 50 years ago, while the rest of the Central Coast has grown at an astounding pace.

Today, Guadalupe is a town poised between its past and its future. In 2003, the inaugural year of the Guadalupe Speaks project the small town is on the cusp of modernization and large-scale development. Through the Guadalupe Speaks project, the community will be able to document its history and unique, multicultural way of life.

Using the Guadalupe Speaks Oral Histories

Guadalupe Speaks: Mary Harris Interview
Interviewed by: Stevie Ruiz
Transcribed by: Stevie Ruiz
Date of Interview: April 24, 2004

Stevie Ruiz: My name is Stevie Ruiz and today is April 24, 2004. It' Saturday and it's 5:20 p.m. We are in the Guadalupe Dunes Center. Could you please state your full name?

Mary Harris: My name is Mary Louise Gladden Harris.

Ruiz: Your age?

Harris: My age is almost 71.

Ruiz: And your ethnic identity

Harris: I am Black.

Ruiz: Where were you born?

Harris: I was born in Buffalo, New York.

Ruiz: What year was that?

Harris: 1933.

Ruiz: In the midst of the Great Depression?

Harris: I think it was not in the midst. A lot of the Depression was in the 1920s. Maybe we were on the fringe or we were coming out of it. As a baby, I didn't feel it.

Ruiz: Talk a little bit about your parents. What occupation did your father have?

Harris: My father was part Indian and part Black. His job was in the steel mill. He worked for a company called Republic Steel. He worked that job until he retired. He used to work on what we called the

swing shift. He worked mornings or late in the afternoon. Or he would work nights. He would always rotate shifts. It was a very dangerous job. There were times where he had got burned from the steel. One time he got splashed in the face and on his foot, so he had to take time off from being burned from the steel. It was a very dangerous job.

My father was born in Charlotte, South Carolina. My mother was born in Camden, South Carolina and she was born to my grandfather who was born in 1868. She was one of the seven children. They used to work in the fields when they were younger. My grandfather had a huge farm down there in South Carolina. My mother worked in the fields and when she became grown she moved to Buffalo, New York. My father eventually also moved to Buffalo, New York and they met in Buffalo, New York. My mother used to clean houses. She went to work out in the rich peoples' area. She would clean houses six days a week until she retired. She was so good that even after she retired she would have some of the ladies calling saying, "Oh Jane, could you please come clean my house?" She would help them with the occasional dinner, setting tables and serve. She was very good at what she did.

Ruiz: What types of families would she serve?

Harris: They were rich families of all races. Jewish families, Italian families, and I guess Anglo families. I enjoyed when she worked for one Italian family because one family had an Italian bakery. On Saturday morning if she went to their house to clean, she came back with some nice and fresh warm Italian bread. I just love Italian bread till this day.

Ruiz: So your mom had a good rapport with her employers?

Harris: Oh excellent!

Ruiz: So she always got along?

Harris: She could get along with anybody.

Ruiz: That's interesting. I'm interested in your father as well because you said he was a part of the steel factories. Was your father apart of a union?

Harris: Oh, yes he was.

Ruiz: What type of process did he have to go through? Was it easy becoming apart of the union?

Harris: I believe you paid your dues and you went to union meetings. I recall one time when they went on strike. The union would send baskets of food to eat.

Ruiz: Could you describe what year this was and what type of union it was?

Harris: No, I don't remember the type of union at all. I was kind of young. This took place in the 1940s. I don't know if it was before the war or after the war.

Ruiz: Could you describe a little bit about your middle school and high school experiences in Buffalo?

Harris: I think I had the best education anybody could receive. I went to a public school. It was called PS-47. I started out in kindergarten. I always had fantastic grades. When I was in the fifth grade, I recall this teacher who used to have me correct other students' papers. I would even take them home for homework and correct the other childrens' homework papers or test papers.

Of course when I became grown, I felt like she just used me. *(laughing)* I was her little flunkie who did her work for her. She's the one who was supposed to be correcting the papers, not me. I also remember going to electric shop, going to wood shop and machine shop. I learned how to do all those things which helped me a great deal after I became grown because I still use those skills today for survival. We had a great art class and a great art teacher. I learned all kinds of art and the basics of art from the art class.

Our school was an unusual school because we had a ninth grade but I wasn't about to stay there for the ninth grade because that would be my freshman year. Everybody wanted to go to the high school for their freshman year so I did not stay. I went into a city wide spelling contest when I was in the eighth grade. In the city of Buffalo, I came in number 17. I was the winner from my school of course, and I received a Webster's dictionary. But, I came in 17 in the city of Buffalo. I also participated in a speaking contest. The day of the speaking contest, I was hoarse and I could hardly talk. Out of five contestants, I came in third.

Ruiz: Could you describe a little bit about the ethnic composition of your neighborhood when you were growing up?

Harris: We had Germans, Polish, Chinese, Blacks, and Italians. We were a melting pot. We had some of everything. The steel mill that my father worked in was in a Polish area. We all had our sections where predominantly Italians would live in Italian sections. I don't think it was planned that way, but it was just that way. In an area of town which is in south Buffalo is where the steel mill was. Mainly Polish people lived over there and there must have been a majority of Polish men working at the steel mill. Once a year, the steel mill

would have a picnic in the park and my father would take us. They played Polish music and we got free hot dogs and mustard. *(laughing)* We'd get up there on the little stage because they'd have one where people would dance, so we would get up there and dance like everybody else.

In the Jewish area, they lived out in the east of Buffalo and they had the best cheesecake. I would go there to get my cheesecake. It's just great. I went to school with all these different kids too and we never had problems of course. We always got along together.

Ruiz: I'm interested a little about your education. You mentioned your education when you said you went to electric shops and mechanical shops. I'm just interested what type of courses were you taking. Were they just limited to vocational training?

Harris: This was included in our elementary education. Our classes went from kindergarten to ninth grade. When you got in the sixth grade you learned to sew, you would learn to make an apron, a headband, and you hemmed a towel and made a potholder. We learned how to cook and then we would go to learn how to knit or whatever we were interested in. When we got into the sixth, seventh and eighth grades we took wood shop, electric shop and machine shop. I made a cookie sheet and I made a lamp. I strung a lamp. I know how to go to the store and get the components to make a lamp. I used to change all the electric plugs in my house myself. I did it myself. I'd go buy new circuits and get them myself instead of calling an electrician to do it.

Ruiz: Did that extend to men as well?

Harris: Every student, both girls and boys.

Ruiz: Gender wasn't an issue.

Harris: Right, that's why I said I had the best education you could have. We had a variety of high schools. We had vocational high schools. That was something that I had wanted for our high school to include. But instead they are becoming fewer and fewer at the high school. I think vocational education is extremely important for the survival of many young people these days. Not only is it a job but many of those jobs pay a lot of money, if you become an auto mechanic, or a landscaper. I think they had meat cutting at the high school. They just don't have the number of vocations that students can go into. They even cut back on home economics. I think they have sewing sometimes. But cooking got cut because they didn't have enough students.

Ruiz: How do you think vocational training or vocational education shapes the goals, aspirations and ambitions of a student if they're just being given vocational training? How do you think it shapes their views of education and what types of ambitions for higher education?

Harris: I don't think they should just be exposed to vocational classes. I think they should only be exposed to vocational classes. I think they should be exposed to all academics so that they could make a choice in which direction they want to go. Some students are better using their head. I think in vocation you have to use your head and use your hands more. But, you take all forms for anything. I think our children should be exposed to all the possibilities because there are so many. When you look at the telephone service. It has gotten so big. The different kinds of jobs you can do is just unlimited. Most kids never know all the things that are possible.

Ruiz: Do you think that type of value in education you even found that in your childhood? Do you think that extended into your childhood as well?

Harris: Yes, I think. I would never have taken a shop class. But, there it was. It was offered to us. It was something we were required to do. I'm so glad that I went to a school that could do that. But then, Buffalo had good schools.

Ruiz: How do you think Buffalo's education system was compared to other education systems in the state of New York during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s? You said it was the exception right in Buffalo.

Harris: It was the only one that I knew. But, I felt it was good compared to what I found after I moved to California.

Ruiz: What do you mean by that?

Harris: Those things were being cut out of the schools when my children went to school. There were no longer those shops or home economics in California. I thought home economics were very important because everyone should learn how to survive on their own. They should learn how to cook and prepare food at least for themselves even if they didn't have to do it for others. If you didn't have much money you could make your own clothes, you could save a lot of money. It's not as true today but I believe it can be done. Sewing is something that I learned to do even before I learned it in school. In fact, I used to make a lot of my kids clothes. I used to make their pajamas, draperies, slip covers and coats and jackets. I made all those things for my children. Then, when the girls became teenagers I bought a sewing machine for every single one of my girls and I had five. So, I said I would rather buy you a

piece of material then go to the store and buy you a dress. You will never see your sister coming to meet you with the same thing on.

Ruiz: You talked a little bit about your parents' occupation when you were younger. Describe about what type of part-time jobs you had when you were in school, particularly high school in Buffalo.

Harris: During high school, I worked in a jewelry store that was a pawn shop. It was on the main street that we called "The Turf," which was the main street in the Black area. The owner of the store was a Jewish man. So, I celebrated Hanukah and the other holidays. I also would get a day off sometimes too. I learned a lot from that job.

Ruiz: Could you describe a little about your experiences with your boss? Maybe how much he paid you? How he approached you? What your rapport was with him or what your relationship was with his family? How did you feel towards your boss?

Harris: They were pretty nice. His wife would come in occasionally. She was very nice too. I never had any problems. I liked the boss okay until I found out he was paying me way below what he should have been. He was paying me seventy five cents an hour. I was a person who didn't really pay attention to how much I was being paid. I was just happy to be working. I think I was about fifteen or sixteen years old. When I quit I got this check from the state that said I had been underpaid so they were making up the amount I should have been paid. I'm sure they weren't making it up, I'm sure they got the money from the owner.

Ruiz: Why do you think he would do that?

Harris: He was tight that's why. (laughing)

Ruiz: I mean to you.

Harris: He was tight.

Ruiz: ` So you didn't think it was personal?

Harris: I don't think so. I think he would have done it to anybody. Also, he would sometimes have some things left over from pawning. Dear old Mary was to go take it and take the toothbrush and clean it really good. He might even sell a few things as new, which wasn't very nice. I knew what was going on.

Ruiz: I'm a little bit interested by the district you were talking about. You said there was a district where African-Americans would be. You said it was like the main road. Could you describe what that area was like and what type of atmosphere it was at that time and what year it was?

Harris: Oh gosh, it was from . . . I know it was in the 1940s and 1950s. I have to think how old I was. Up till the 1950s and before. It was the main drag where people went to socialize. They had the clubs on that street and I'm sure there were bars on that street and restaurants. You could see people going down the street in their cars. You would stand and talk and wave at your friends. Also, mainly that street is where entertainers came through like Sarah Vaughn and Tina Turner. They played in small bars. They would come and entertain and you would try to get in for that night. It would be crowded in there. They would go and another group would go in. I didn't see all these people but they were there. That was just the main strip where we would go see everyone. It no longer exists today.

Ruiz: I'm going to talk a little bit about your family and you becoming more independent and your own personal family as far as your

husband and your kids. What year were you married and could you describe where you met your husband and his occupation?

Harris: I got married in 1951. I met my husband a couple of years before that in a skating rink. He was an official in a skating rink. I used to sell ten tickets so I could get in free. So, I'd always sell ten tickets. I had a lot of friends and they'd get their tickets from me because if you had to pay at the door it costs more. So, that's where I met him and we became friends. What did he do in those days? He was taking some classes. He worked in Bel-Air Craft back in those days. He was an engineer.

Ruiz: An engineer? Of what?

Harris: He used to work at another place. Before he worked at Bell he worked at Sylvania making radios or other electronic things there.

Ruiz: What level of education did he have?

Harris: College education with straight A's.

Ruiz: We're going to transition a little more into Guadalupe. Why did you come to Guadalupe and what year?

Harris: I arrived in Guadalupe in April 1960. My husband was working at Martin Marietta in Denver, Colorado. The actual base was in Littleton where he went to work. And they were transferring him here to Vandenberg for eighteen months, which I didn't like. I tried to get out of coming, so he tried to get out of coming. And they told him well either you go or you lose your job. So, guess what we came. While he was at Vandenberg, he just happened to move from one department to another department and it cut off our return to Denver. So, we weren't going back to Denver after that. I had told him when he to pick us up from the airport in Los Angeles. I

told him the next time I get on this freeway, I want to be on my way out. *(Laughing)* I just want to get out of here, I just want to go back to Denver because I really loved Denver and we were just getting ready to buy a house, but we never did buy that house there.

Ruiz: Why did you specifically choose Guadalupe? Did you fall in love with the town? (Harris Laughing) Did you find something appealing about it? How did you find it? And, cause I think you have an interesting story as to how you chose Guadalupe.

Harris: Well, I never looked personally. But, while we were still in Denver my husband had been looking for a place for us to live. And, he went to Santa Maria and he was refused by everyone he went to. One person even told him, "Why don't you go out to airport circle where you belong?" And so he asked them, "Well would you live there?" And they said, "No!" And he said to them, "Why would you ask me to live there?" And so this was a white person who thought that he didn't belong in Santa Maria. I guess there was a lot of discrimination at that time in Santa Maria. He tried in Lompoc and another co-worker took him to Lompoc to try to rent a house there. And I guess they looked at several, but this one place they went to, it was a realtor showing them this house. And, every time the realtor spoke he referred his remarks to his co-worker who was white. So, after a while the co-worker said, "It's not for me, it's for him." And they said, "Oh, this place is taken." So, he didn't get that either. So, he tried Guadalupe and right away he was able to get a house.

Ruiz: Why do you think he was able to get a house so easily in Guadalupe?

Harris: Because they weren't as prejudice as they were in the other cities. *(Laughing)*

Ruiz: And what year was this?

Harris: 1960.

Ruiz: 1960. And, what is going on as far as national movements in this country during the 1960s as we know? If we look at the civil rights movement.

Harris: There had been the civil rights movement fighting and the N.A.A.C.P. fighting for equality. In fact, there was pastor of a church, First Christian Church in Santa Maria. He had written an article, where he was encouraging people to rent to those who are transferred here who happen to be Black. He said that there should not be that discrimination. And, that's what I had read about it after I arrived.

Ruiz: What type of ethnic composition was the congregation?

Harris: Probably, maybe white.

Ruiz: Interesting. I'm just curious, what do you think, in your opinion, considering you lived in the 1960s on the central coast, what was it like being an African-American living on the central coast during this time as far as your own emotions? What were you going through at that time? I know it's hard to gage back that far.

Harris: Well, actually since I knew this existed all over the United States and maybe other parts in the world.

Ruiz: What existed?

Harris: Discrimination and many atrocities dating all the way back to slavery. These things they didn't bother me but I knew when they were happening. I never thought of people as they're white, they're whatever they were. In fact, when I got here I couldn't tell the

Filipinos from the Spanish. (Laughing) I had a very good friend who was Mexican. I'd say, I can't tell is she Mexican or Filipino. And she would say, "Mary just look at the eyes and look at this and look at that." I said, "Okay, it's hard for me to tell." Then I had to learn the Japanese from the Chinese because the Chinese mainly had one syllable names. And the Japanese had more syllables. It was too much trouble trying to figure out who was what. I really never know what everyone's ethnic background is because I don't focus on that. I had other things to focus on. I just don't think about those things.

Ruiz: Do you think you come from that type of aware or that type of perspective because of your experience as an African-American on the central coast and going through the type of experiences you've been through or struggles?

Harris: I think it made me stronger. And, as a result, I don't think about it that much. I know when somebody is doing something because I read a lot of people quite well. I don't let it bother me, or I might laugh about it like haha. And, I just keep on going because I know who I am, where I've been, and where I'm going. I'm not going to let any of that sidetrack me.

Ruiz: I'm just curious, you said that there was some type of racial convenance as far as housing discrimination. Were you familiar with what type of laws that were sort of implemented in California? Many people have this assumption that there was only a civil rights struggle in the South. You know, I was just curious to see what your point of view is, was there some type of struggle that people aren't aware of that we don't often hear about? Often, when we think about the civil rights movement we think about the South concerning Jim Crow laws. Did you need a law in order to use any

means of discrimination? Were there necessarily laws in California during the time about housing discrimination like there were in the South?

Harris: Actually, I have no idea about any laws or anything in California. I've never searched up any, however, I only knew that it was practiced. I also know that at that time airport circle was a horrible place to live, where the lady referred my husband. There were a bunch of barracks out by the airport. It was unpaved and they were all sitting around and there was mainly Blacks and Mexicans living there.

Ruiz: What type of housing was this? What airport was this?

Harris: Santa Maria airport. It didn't look like it does today so I couldn't point out the spot where that place existed. My husband did drive us around to show me what airport circle looked like. When I say barracks, you know what barracks are? Well barracks are things that I think soldiers used to live in when Camp Cook was there. Maybe some of the barracks were from Camp Cook. It was these structures that might be lifted up and you would go up these little steps. It's not a place where you would want to live. If it rained you would have all these puddles. It was like a third world country out there. *(Laughing*) It was terrible.

It was like there were unwritten laws. It's like they just practiced it and they didn't advertise it. But you sometimes felt it. My husband felt it more than we did because he was out more than I was. I was at home taking care of the kids. He went to a restaurant in Santa Maria with a friend of his. He mainly worked with white guys or other guys I don't know what they were. They went into a restaurant to get a cup of coffee and they refused to serve him a

cup of coffee. So, you know how blatant is that? And then a friend of mine told me that on some of the houses still in Santa Maria there's a notation that says, "Do not sell to Blacks." It's there, it's everywhere, it's just not there all the time. Sometimes it's just very subtle. But, it's there but I just can't focus on that. I just can't think about that. I have more important things to do.

Ruiz: You described that Guadalupe was one of the few places that would rent to you. What was the ethnic composition of Guadalupe when you first moved here?

Harris: I believe the majority was Mexican. And then of course, we saw that there were Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, Italians, Swiss, and Portuguese. We had a little melting pot right here in Guadalupe too. I think there were one or two Black families that we had gotten to know.

Ruiz: How do you think that shaped your experience in Guadalupe?

Harris: It really didn't have anything to do with it at all because I do what I do. I don't do it as it relates to discrimination or anything like that.

Ruiz: You mentioned that you had a Mexican friend.

Harris: Lots of Mexican friends. They were here. *(laughing)*

Ruiz: How has that affected your life as far as adopting new things and learning new things about new cultures? You didn't mention Mexicans when you were in Buffalo, right?

Harris: That's because I didn't know any Mexicans in Buffalo.

Ruiz: So, this was a new experience for you as far as being transplanted to a new place?

Harris: Right.

Ruiz: What type of new things were you learning at that time because I'm sure things must have been different for you?

Harris: Well, it was. Because I had mainly Mexican friends and I had all kinds of friends, including Filipino friends even till this day. I have a lot of friends. I don't call them Mexican or Filipino or Portuguese but it's not something I focus on. We're all human beings so I don't focus on whose what. But, I learned about Mexican food and they would make fix Mexican food. I like Mexican food. And, I started to fix Mexican food myself and I can make some pretty good Mexican food. And not only that, I really like Filipino food. I can fix some really good Filipino food too. I like the food of all cultures. I like Japanese food, Chinese food, Italian food, and I like everybody's food. Like I said before, the Italians had good bread.

Ruiz: So does food essentially act as the language of all cultures?

Harris: I think that helps.

Ruiz: So food definitely plays a major part in everybody's life so was food important at certain festivals like Mexican festivals? Filipino festivals? Could you describe what type of atmosphere was going on as far as the celebrations that we affiliate with different cultures?

Harris: They'd be having dances and singing. As I recall, of course there was always the food. They'd always had the food that they were selling. Of course, I would go to see how this one fixes their food and how this one fixes their food. I have friends who happen to be Filipino who say I was planning on making some lumpia, because they know I love lumpia. I've had friends make lumpia and give them to me because they know I like lumpia.

Ruiz: I'm going to talk a little bit about the Rialto theatre. What role did the Rialto theatre play in your life in Guadalupe?

Harris: They were fighting for rights and that's how they expressed it with the teatros. Of course I would be there. I'd go to all the celebrations and all the things that were happening. I belonged to Guadalupe Community Counsel way back in the day. My husband had belonged to it also before me. And we were fighting for services for Guadalupe as well. One of the things that we eventually did was to approach the school board in that day. I can't remember the years. But, they didn't have bi-lingual education in the school. Of course, there were many Spanish-speaking children who didn't know English at all. So, we approached the school board and they said there wasn't enough time to write grants for bi-lingual education. They were told to make time. So, we all started yelling and cheering in the meeting. So, they wrote a proposal and got bi-lingual education in the Guadalupe school district.

Ruiz: What group was this?

Harris: The Guadalupe Community Counsel? I don't know if we were still that when this happened. This was after my husband died and we had hired a young man named Roger Herow to take over the job at the Guadalupe Service Center. He was the one who spoke for us when we went to approach the school board. He is now the top guy with the Santa Barbara County Health Department.

Ruiz: What role did the Rialto Theatre have in that?

Harris: I don't remember. They were fighting for harassment in school. Some of the children had not been treated right. They were fighting for things like that. I recalled my friend said that one of her children had their head stuck into a fish bowl as punishment. Other children

were slammed up against a wall by a teacher. They wanted to be treated equally as other human beings. There were other things. I wasn't even involved in all of the things. I was like on the fringe.

Ruiz: Was the Rialto Theatre a place where they would show movies for political activism?

Harris: No, they would have their own rallies. The rallies when somebody would come such as Cesar Chavez. If Cesar came they would have these things in the teatro. I don't know if they were college students. They would put on a play and put it into a play in the gym. People would go in and sit down to watch it.

Ruiz: The plays were basically about . . . ?

Harris: The hardships.

Ruiz: Of who?

Harris: The Mexican people.

Ruiz: About education and discrimination?

Harris: All things.

Ruiz: Your group was fighting for social justice?

Harris: We were fighting for services for Guadalupe. This was under the Community Action Commission. We had to go to the meetings monthly in Santa Barbara. So, there were four of us who remained. Many moved away or died. There were four of us: Helen Rivas, Charlie who was her brother, Susie Armenta Gass and Mary Harris. We became known as the four horsemen because we were together. We went to these meetings always together. I guess we were representing Guadalupe at that time and we all lived here.

Ruiz: I'm just interested in what type of role you played in your family? You mentioned what type of occupation you held when you had your children in Guadalupe and how did that shape your life?

Harris: Well, I never ever had planned to go to work. I never really worked after I got married except for baby sitting and taking in sewing. I always stayed at home. So, when my husband died that totally unexpected. He died of kidney failure. It put me and my children on welfare for about three years because there was no insurance. After three years I said I have got to do something. I've got to go to work. I didn't know what to do here because this was not a place I was as familiar with as I was with my own hometown. So, I asked a social worker who had come to visit. I asked if she knew a place where I could get a job. She brought me a flyer the next time she came and it was from the Santa Barbara Education Office. I went in to put an application and I got the job. I got the job for Project I.D.E.A.: Ideas for Development of Infants at Home Enriching Activities. So, I started doing that and at first I had one child. At first, I got to be at home when my children got out of school because my youngest one was in kindergarten. The next year I got to work more. Even when they got out of school, I still was able to be home before they got out of school. When they had holidays I was able to be off on the same holidays that they had because it was connected with education. I taught infants at home to speak English and also using fine and gross motor skills until the money out in about a year or two. I forget how long.

Then, when that ran out I was introduced to another job under the same education. It was in pre-school and so I went. We had to interview for that job and I had to know Spanish. Well, when this was coming up I had started to take English at Hancock. I started at the Guadalupe Service Center that my husband had been

running. They had Hancock classes there. So, I started taking Spanish classes. I had the interview maybe two weeks after I had started taking Spanish. Part of the interview was in Spanish and so I had to take a written test in Spanish and then an oral. So, I did the written test. When it was time for my oral the lady said that I did pretty good on the Spanish test. Then she started asking me questions in Spanish and I said that I didn't understand what she was saying but that I did hear "trabajo" and I know that "trabajo" means work and I got the job. *(Everyone laughing)*.

But, I kept on going to school and I learned Spanish. I learned to read it at write it and translate it. However, I never could fully understand or comprehend when people talk to me. I was learning Castilian and the people around here don't speak Castilian Spanish, unless it's a Colombian. If I run into a Colombian and I understand what they're saying I'm shocked that I can understand. That did happen to me one time. I asked why I could understand him but not the people around here. He said, "That's because in Colombia, we speak Castilian Spanish and the people here they don't speak Castilian. They speak Spanglish." Everybody is a little different and there are a couple of different dialects too. So, that's how I found out I couldn't speak like everyone around here. I can understand the instructors some. The first instructor I had, I had a very hard time with him because he was Cuban and he was an attorney who had migrated from Cuba to here. He was teaching the class so we clashed. I never could understand him. So my friend she was also taking the same Spanish class, she said not to worry because she didn't understand him either. She said, "He was using all these big words that we don't even use which is why we couldn't understand him." Also, he couldn't answer my questions. There's the feminine "A" and masculine "O" at the end of words. I

would ask him why is it “O” on this word and “A” on this one he would just say that’s just the way it was. I would say, “Oh, no it isn’t. There’s a reason for it because there’s a rule for everything.” So, we clashed, but I got an A. We had students who wouldn’t come to class because they knew Spanish. I told him that they shouldn’t get a good grade in the class if they didn’t bother to come to class. I would also tell other students, who happened to be a neighbor, that they had to come to the class.

Ruiz: Okay, so we talked a little bit about your job. How do you think that shaped because you said your husband had died, how old were you at that point?

Harris: I was around 33 years old or something like that.

Ruiz: Okay, so you were fairly young?

Harris: Oh, yes! I was very young with six children.

Ruiz: How did that shape your experience as a single mother in the 1960s and 1970s?

Harris: He died in 1968. I knew I had this big responsibility and I knew that I had to take care of my family. Fortunately, we had bought a home two years before he died in 1966. In 1966 we had bought the home. So at leasts, we had a place to live and because the payments were nice and easy with $89 a month. The interest was low at 5 ½%. It wasn’t difficult so I just worked and I learned a lot from working. I learned a lot from the different cultures as I worked because I interfaced with a lot of the parents and the children. I learned a lot from all the different cultures I was involved with.

Ruiz What types of things did you learn?

Harris: I learned about attitudes like Mexican men were macho all kinds of things like that. You could understand what was going on in the families with the children and the mother.

Ruiz: Gender roles? Could you describe your experiences as an educator with that in Mexican families?

Harris: No. *(Harris Laughing)* Well some of the things weren't as pleasant. You don't want to talk about these like that. You know why something is happening in a family with the children or the mother. You just understand what is going on. Because very often, say if children misbehave, they blame it on the kids or the parents that it's their fault that they're not doing what they should do. Sometimes there are extenuating circumstances to what occurs in different cultures, even in my own.

Ruiz: Could you describe gender roles as far as your experiences in your family? I know we talked a little about the dynamic between you and your husband and gender roles. I was just curious how that has shaped you life?

Harris: Actually, I was put on a pedestal when I was married. My husband put me on a pedestal. He did a lot for me. He didn't want me to work. I didn't have to work. He made all the children respect me. They couldn't even twists their mouth or roll their eyes or they'd get popped in the mouth. When we sat down to dinner . . . he was the one that was perfect because believed that there was a place for everything and everything in its place.

Ruiz: Could you describe that a little more?

Harris: If you have some toys then they don't belong in middle of the living room floor because they belonged in your toy box. A place for everything and everything in its place.

Ruiz: Do you think that was extended to people?

Harris: I don't know, I never thought about it that way. If he saw a picture that was tilted he would go and fix the picture.

Ruiz: He was a perfectionist.

Harris: Yeah, and when we sat down to eat dinner, sometimes he would have this board that said "Board of Education" right there on the table. So we had to eat proper and set the table. We had to eat with one hand and all that. We had ones who would sweep the floor, wash the dishes or put the dishes away. We always did that. However, after he died we became a lot less formal. And we had a lot of fun at the kitchen table. We would come home and talk about what happened at school. We would crack up laughing at the table. Maybe, they would have to get up and leave the table because they were having trouble holding their food because they were laughing so hard. We had a ball.

Ruiz: How did your husband's death affect your relationship with your kids?

Harris: It didn't affect it. It was about the same.

Ruiz: Did you grow closer?

Harris: No, it was the same. They all had to respect me. They all their chores and I was teaching them all the things they needed to do or learn as children. They all had to help me in some way to cook. We just carried on. After I knew that was something I had to do. I just did it.

Ruiz: Do you think the same type of cosmic family with the mom, the dad and the kids (six kids), sort of extended, with the exception of the number of kids, extended to every black woman or the majority of black women in the 1960s? Do you think they had the same experience as you or do you think you were in the minority at that time?

Harris: I don't know. I really didn't know that many black families in the 1960s. I was out of my element in the 1960s because I was here. So, I didn't have that much contact with my own culture at all.

Ruiz: What about members of your family?

Harris: Well, they were back in Buffalo, New York or scattered in other places on the east. I did have a cousin in Los Angeles but she and her daughter lived together. So, we didn't see each other all the time. We always took everything in stride. I believe that the women in our family were more independent. We were able to do what we wanted to do.

Ruiz: I'm just curious because growing up as far as being independent and then going to becoming a housemaker essentially, and then having to transition again. How did that affect you? Were you always prepared to be so independent during those times even as being a homemaker?

Harris: Heck no! My life was going to be staying at home taking care of the children and cooking. My husband loved to eat so I made cakes, pies, and cookies. I really did do a lot at home. I know that he didn't know it. But, I knew that when sometimes when he was trying to make a decision on something he would ask me hypothetical situations or questions. He would say, "What would

you do or what do you think about this or that?" And then, I'd tell him and then he would go and do it.

Ruiz: So he was always asking for your input?

Harris: We'd talk a lot. We talked a lot. We socialized with other people in the area. We had a lot of fun together. It's just that when he died, I was so angry at God. I didn't cry. I felt if I ever cried I would never stop, so I tried not to cry. I was in the reading room and asking God, "How could you do this to me?" Believe it or not, I was told that I was being prepared all this time for this. I started thinking about it. I got me a place to live, so I don't have to move anymore. What have I got to worry about? And from then on, I just thank God every day for my children and for my home. I just went out and did what I had to do. And apparently He must have supplied me with my first job. It was a job that I could still do with my children still coming in after I got home from work. Everything seemed to fall right into place as I needed it.

Ruiz: Do you think that not only the town of Guadalupe, but you mentioned your friend helped you get the job or she recommended you?

Harris: It was just a social worker.

Ruiz: So, What type of network was occurring in Guadalupe as far as you said you were out of your element and almost by yourself with your kids? How did you build an extended family network in Guadalupe?

Harris: When my husband got sick, I found that the people in Guadalupe really cared about us. My husband was eventually sick for four months. He was eventually taken him to Cottage Hospital in Santa

Barbara because they were going to prepare him for a kidney transplant. The people here in Guadalupe formed a carpool. I did know how to drive. When I went to school they did not teach you how to drive a car because it was something you did on your own back east. I don't know how it is today. So, I didn't know how to drive and my husband had taken me everywhere, unless I was with friends who took me. When my husband was in the hospital, the people here formed a carpool. They would take turns driving me to Santa Barbara to my husband. Even the Marinol Sisters at the Catholic Church, he was Catholic, they were also involved in the carpool. Sometimes they would take us on Sunday. They would take my children and me. I would prepare a big picnic lunch. They would drop me off at the hospital. The Sisters would take the kids and go to the park. They'd have lunch and let the kids play and come back to the hospital to pick me up and then we'd come home. There were different people who took me.

Then after he died, I had expressed to one friend that I wanted to go back to Buffalo. She said, "How could you?" I started thinking that they really cared about me here. Also, a lot of money was raised by the community in Santa Maria up and down the coast. They sent donations to us and they had an account in the bank for us. People brought us all kinds of foods and things. They brought fresh eggs and beef from a fresh locker. It was the most tender beef you ever tasted in your life. They just brought us all kinds of things. We got a lot from the church, where my husband had spoken at this one church, where the pastor had put an article in the newspaper. He spoke there are one time. They made great donations to my family. One of the members had come and taken my son to buy him clothes and things to wear. When I realized that the people here really cared, I figured I should stay here. Even

after the funeral, one of the men realized I had paid for the plot. He came to the house one day and he had checks and cash and he said he heard that I had to pay for the plot and everything. So, he went up and down the street to gather donations and he said he wanted to give it back to me. There was no reason for me to leave.

Ruiz: Like you said, everything fell into place.

Harris: Everything fell into place from that day on.

Ruiz: Is that what you think that makes Guadalupe so special that it has that community like you were describing?

Harris: We do, I believe we do. They certainly were good to us and they would help in anything I ever wanted to do, even people out of the area. I remember one man who must have been connected with the fair in Santa Maria. He told me that anytime my kids wanted to go to the rodeo, he said to let him know and that he would say that they could go to the rodeo. At the sheds where they take the vegetables, one of the guys said to come over to the shed and get whatever I wanted. So, it was just everybody. Also, when he was still sick a friend, who lived in Santa Maria, had an article put in the paper saying that a prominent citizen from Guadalupe needed blood. And so, they got a recreation bus and that bus was filled up with people who went to Santa Maria to give blood for my husband.

Ruiz: From here?

Harris: From here. Yes, from Guadalupe. I believe they gave it from other places too. They said that was the largest donation of blood that they had since World War II. So, what can I say? They were my family.

Ruiz: You mentioned a little about the Marinol Sisters? Could you describe hat role religion played in your home as far as with your husband and even after your husband past away.

Harris: Well, my husband was Catholic. The church that I belonged to didn't exist in this area at that time. So, I sent the children to church with their dad. The Sisters knew me and they would come to visit. I would even go to Bible study sometimes. At one time, a primary school was out at Main Street and I would pick up the children there to pick them up for Catechism every week. So, we were all friends even with the sister. We were friends. One who even ended up in Peru had written us fro Peru.

Ruiz: Did you form relationships with the Sisters?

Harris: We had a relationship with them. I was able to speak freely with them. We talked.

Ruiz: Do your kids remain Catholic today?

Harris: Let's just say they don't practice it. I go to a different church, I go to a Protestant church in Santa Maria, which is the church I grew up in as a child.

Ruiz: That's interesting.

Harris: I am not happy to say that my children aren't as religious as I am. Some of them are. The two older ones are but as you get down to the two youngest ones they're not as much.

Ruiz: One of the other things I wanted to talk about is you mentioned that you were in constant contact with different families when you would visit them in their homes: including infants to teach them English. I'm assuming that these were primarily Spanish speaking families.

Harris: Everyone.

Ruiz: During the 1960s, there was the UFW movement. What types of conditions were in the homes that you visited in? Were any of these families or parents migrant workers?

Harris: At that time, I didn't relate migrant to anyone because I really didn't know.

Ruiz: That's true.

Harris: I became familiar with migrant after I got on the school board. But, I have seen where families lived in housing that had dirt floors. Some had homes that were very dark and cots and things. There were little tiny small dark rooms. I've seen some that were sparsely furnished but they would be so clean you could eat off their floor. It was really absolutely clean. They were always very gracious. They always wanted you eat something. They'd be offended if you didn't eat something. See, that's another way you get to learn about the food.

Ruiz: Did any of them share the working conditions prior to the UFW movement?

Harris: No, they would not complain. We would be visiting about the children and how they could help the children or teaching them to speak English. Not one person complained.

Ruiz: Are you familiar with why the UFW movement came to Guadalupe at the time.

Harris: It's kind of fuzzy in my minds. I don't remember any details.

Ruiz: You weren't actively engaged?

Harris: Right. I was on the fringe on the outside. I would participate in some things.

Ruiz: Like what?

Harris: It was because I would be with my friend and so she would say come on Mary.

Ruiz: Did you witness any of the movement occurring in Guadalupe with Cesar Chavez? You mentioned that they held plays.

Harris: I remember when a man from the State came down to question the people. We had a town hall meeting. I'm trying to remember where we even had it. It could have been in the Vets Hall. I couldn't remember. I did go to the meeting because they were questioning people on their different experiences they had that were not good.

Ruiz: What did they share?

Harris: I don't remember but I knew they were here trying to find out what was going on.

Ruiz: Was there any polarity in the community? Was the community divided on the issue about the UFW movement being here?

Harris: Not that I could see.

Ruiz: So it wasn't evident. Since we've been talking about race and gender, I just wanted to ask you, given your experiences on the central coast, what's your definition of racism?

Harris: I don't have one. I don't have a definition persae. I just know when it's happening.

Ruiz: You can feel it.

Harris: You can tell by people's actions. They seem to ignore you when you go into the store and you're waiting for them to wait on you. They'll just absolutely ignore you. I know and either I'll go find somebody else. I'll just leave. I'm not going to bother with them and give them my money. Or, I might complain to the manager. Today, what you'll see more. You're going to see somebody watching you or following you because they think you're going to steal something. We have those today. I really don't have a specific definition. They definitions occurred more in the early years when you couldn't sit down in a restaurant. You had to go in the back door. You couldn't use the bathroom. You couldn't drink out of the same faucet. You couldn't do so much. I knew about those things. I don't know of any definitions because it comes in so many forms.

Ruiz: We talked a little bit about social activism in Guadalupe. We touched a little on the Civil Rights Movement but I wanted to get back to it. What atmosphere was going on during the civil rights struggle in Guadalupe or in California? What were the emotions going on that time about the Civil Rights Movement or what was your perspective about hearing about people like Dr. King or Malcolm X or any of the famous leaders that we always hear about like Rosa Parks? What was going on during that time in your life?

Harris: Well, I felt a lot of anger about the things that were happening to them. You know how they would get out the dogs and sick the dogs on them when they'd march down the street. They would arrest them and put them in jail. It makes you very angry when you see how your people are being treated. But, I wasn't with them. I was here in Guadalupe.

Ruiz: In addition to race, we were also going to touch on gender and how gender has shaped your life. I was just curious what your definition is of sexism?

Harris: I don't know.

Ruiz: Just like race, have you had any experience with gender discrimination?

Harris: I can't think of anything because whatever I went to do I never had anybody keeping me from getting it because I was a female. I was always encouraged by others who worked with me and around me. I recall when I was working with the CTE which was the Center for Therapeutic Education which was special education. I worked with high school children from 14-21. Having counseling was one of the components of the education. We had psychologists there who participated in counseling and I was also apart of the group. We all worked together as a team. At one time, two of the teachers were men and the psychologists were also men. We were working with the students and this one day we had a student who really disrupted the group. I knew where he was coming from because he didn't know how to read. I had been working on reading with him. He must have been about 16 years old. There was another student in the group who had talked about he had gone to try to get a job. So, he went to fill out an application at a gas station to get a part time job. Everyone was praising him. This other guy he got up and started throwing chairs. He was terrible and then he left. And so I started encouraging the other student. I said, "Don't let him prevent you from going to work because of the way he was acting." After that, the psychologists said that I should get my degree in psychology because I worked well with children. So, that's the kind of people I worked with.

Ruiz: Encouraging.

Harris: Yeah.

Ruiz: How has being a woman constructed your view and your approach to your occupation? Of course you have experience with mother hood. How has that prepared you in your job preparation considering you were working with children?

Harris: Well I had to have compassion for children. I had to be understanding of mothers and families. I made notice in some families that I had learned a long time ago which was managing money. I can't even think of when I didn't know how to manage money. When I was in high school I also took bookkeeping. After we got married, I am the one who kept the books, made the budgets and managed the money. It would cause a hardship for some people because their priorities were a bit mixed up. They didn't understand what the problems were but I wouldn't offer any help unless somebody asked. I could understand or I might make a subtle suggestion as it related to the situation.

Ruiz: It's a fair statement to say that you identified with your students.

Harris: Sure, I understood very well and I also learned that some of the parents in some families did not even know Spanish well. They didn't even know their own language so they had difficulty conversing in their own language. Sometimes the parents might write a note to school, and since I knew how to read Spanish, I knew that they had difficulty in writing Spanish. It would sometimes take a team of us to try to figure out what they writing in the note.

Ruiz: Name two qualities that you carry as a result of your experiences as a mother. You mentioned compassion.

Harris: Patience and Strength

Ruiz: As far as…?

Harris: As far as getting done what you have to do and getting done what you have to do and carrying it through.

Ruiz: How has Guadalupe shaped you into the person you are today?

Harris: Well, let's see… I don't know if it really shaped me. But I can say that they were always here for me. Everyone has always been so nice to me and always helped me with what I needed to do. When I was forced to run for the school board, *(laughing)*, by a friend who went to the office and had me fill out the papers, I ran and I didn't campaign but I got on. And then when the time came again, I got on again, but I didn't campaign. I remained on that school board at the end of this school year it'll be thirty years. I never bothered to campaign. Now, I hear people saying that I need to stay and that they need me. And I say, I think it's time. People have come to me asking me to run for the city council or mayor. I think no way. I don't know. There's something I just don't think about myself to know what the magic is. I'm just me whose down to earth and happy and smiling. I enjoy my life.

Ruiz: Thank You.