

Recent immigrant workers in Iowa's meatpacking industry

Archie Green Fellows Project, 2015-2016

Gilberto Flores interview, 2016-12-09 : interview conducted by John W. McKerley

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Date: December 9, 2016

Duration: 03:27:42

Part 1 of 2

- 00:00:00 Introductions
- 00:01:25 Born in Mexacali, near Tijuana, 1960.
- 00:01:50 Parents both grew up in Mexico, father was a bookkeeper. Marriage had its ups and downs. Divorced and reunited.
- 00:02:10 Parents are both dead now.
- 00:02:30 Easy to come to US during the early 1960's, became more difficult in late '60's, more restrictions.
- 00:30:50 Father came to work in Los Angeles during last separation from mother.
- 00:04:30 Thinks of himself as "50/50" half Mexican, half American.
- 00:06:00 After graduating from high school wanted to go to "air school" to become a pilot, but not financially possible. Instead came to US with mother and went to Los Angeles.
- 00:06:50 Worked at car wash called "Mr. Polish, at a market, furniture company.
- 00:07:30 Applied for amnesty and eventually became citizen.
- 00:07:55 Also worked at McDonald's, even became manager, making \$3.35/hour.
- 00:09:00 Did other jobs for car wash owner, including delivering expensive cars to rich people.
- 00:09:45 McDonald's store manager recruited him as manager, saying, "You've got a good personality". Worked on language and math skills.
- 00:10:45 Delivered *LA Times* in Bel Air, met celebrities, tips large and small

- 00:11:30 Worked at market, stocking shelves and as “basket boy”
- 00:12:30 Decided to quit other jobs and focus on McDonald’s. Important to give two weeks notice.
- 00:13:15 Became swing shift supervisor at McDonald’s, working nights
- 00:14:20 At request of management, transferred to problem store (“in red zone”) located in predominantly black neighborhood (Hawthorne). Became 2d Assistant Store Manager. Working toward promotion to 1st Assistant and eventually Store Manager.
- 00:16:30 Witnessed discrimination at work. Not everyone was held to same appearance standards.
- 00:19:00 Through experience realized that using the word “discrimination” made people feel uncomfortable. Better to say, “It’s not fair,” or “he doesn’t like me.”
- 00:20:00 His supervisor asked him to do development, training other assistant managers. Newer managers, including some he had changed were promoted faster than him. When he discussed issue with boss she gave excuses. Told her he didn’t want to do development work anymore.
- 00:21:50 Working lots of hours. Hard to get a day off. Supposed to work 25 to 28 days on and 3 days off. Actually working 30-35 days straight. Decided to quit.
- 00:22:30 Originally came to LA with mother, lived with father, arrived 1977 or 1978.
- 00:23:40 Quit McDonald’s in December 1990 in middle of shift, threw his tie in the garbage, said good bye to friends.
- 00:25:00 After he quit went to Mexico, was drinking in a bar with his brothers and ran into the brother of a friend who told him about work in Alaska.
- 00:26:50 Called and applied for job
- 00:27:50 Job was on island called Unalaska, between Alaska and Siberia. Processed Pollack and King Crab. “Good experience”. Free housing and free food. Weather was “fine” except for rain storms. Island had been destroyed by tsunami earlier. Alarm siren went off several times. Told to run for higher ground, but after the first one he just went to the

break room and found some food. Job was supposed to last six months, but ended sooner.

- 00:32:00 Girlfriend (Yolanda) from California was living in Iowa. She had been laid off from her job. Recruited by IBP to come to Iowa. Paid \$1,000 bonus and moving expenses.
- 00:32:50 He moved to Iowa after Alaska. Also went to work at IBP. Experienced discrimination in Iowa. When he applied for unemployment benefits was told by "receptionist" that he would have to return to Alaska or California to apply. He knew that was wrong, and returned several times. She kept telling him the same thing. Finally, he was disruptive (talked in Pee Wee Herman voice) and got to talk to supervisor, who approved him immediately and paid him 5 or 6 weeks of benefits on the spot.
- 00:38:00 That experience helped to teach him the importance of being an advocate. Friend was fired from IBP after he missed work because he was stranded in Chicago. Gilberto explained unemployment process and helped him obtain benefits. Won the case and got \$3,000 in back pay.
- 00:41:50 Worked at IBP from 1991 to 2005. In his experience, IBP often took advantage of Hispanic workers. Pushed too hard.
- 00:42:50 Gilberto liked to work different jobs, often volunteered to fill in for absent employees. Supervisor thought that he could assign Gilberto at will, even though he had a regular assignment.
- 00:44:30 Management tried to recruit him to be supervisor or quality control, but not interested. Making \$42,000 a year with overtime. Supervisor job paid \$28,000 with worse hours. Some opportunity for regular pay increases. Said no.
- 00:46:25 Yolanda was working on cut floor in "hot side" of plant. Smells were bad.
- 00:47:00 In 1991 came to Iowa City (University Hospital) because they were trying to have a baby. Very few Hispanic people. Only about 50 Hispanic families in Columbus Junction, where the IBP plant was located. Not many Hispanics in Muscatine either. Moved to Wapello when son, Sixto, started school. He was only the second Hispanic student.
- 00:49:00 Enrolled Sixto in Tae Kwando class so he would be able to defend himself. Also wanted make sure he could swim. Also tried boxing.
- 00:50:00 Fighting was common problem. Taught Sixto to say, "Don't touch me," after two touches, it's OK to fight back.

- 00:52:00 Bought mobile home in Wapello. Very few Hispanic people there.
- 00:54:00 On weekends Gilberto and Yolanda liked to go to Rock Island to to Mexican night club be around other Hispanic people or Muscatine to eat Chinese food. On Sundays they went to Catholic Church together.
- 00:55:20 Yolanda seemed reluctant to go to church with him. After questioning admitted that she'd been going to a different church for about six months. "Light of the World", an awful religion according to Gilberto. Her new religion led to all kinds of problems and ultimately resulted in divorce. Gilberto tried to compromise and learn about her religion, but she became a fanatic and refused to go Catholic church any longer because she couldn't tolerate all the "images."
- 00:59:00 Yolanda attended "Light of the World" services in Chicago. Men and women were separate. Sixto (who was about 7) reported that when he tried to get up to use the restroom one of the men grabbed him and forced him to sit down. Gilberto later confronted the man and warned him not to touch Sixto. He also told Yolanda that she had to defend her child.
- 01:00:00 Yolanda told Gilberto that she wanted a divorce. The couple had gotten married while they were living in Wapello. She also said that she was planning to move to Ottumwa but would continue to work at IBP.
- 01:01:00 Gilberto hired a lawyer who helped them reach a common agreement about child support, visitation, etc. Sixto went to live with Yolanda.
- 01:03:00 Gilberto offered to join Yolanda's church in an attempt to preserve the marriage, but it didn't work. Was unwilling to pay tithe to church. Yolanda was making "good money," but paying 10% of it to the "temple" which seemed excessive to Gilberto. Gilberto noted that the priest was wearing an expensive suit and a Rolex.
- 01:08:35 Gilberto consented to the divorce but instead that he always be allowed to see Sixto.
- 01:09:30 Gilberto tried to be actively involved in Sixto's school activities, worried that he would not speak Spanish properly. Observed other children speaking "broken Spanish". Did not want people to think that Sixto's parents were illiterate.
- 01:13:00 Talked with Sixto about plans after high school. Sixto wanted to be a lawyer, but grades were not good enough to get into Harvard. Sixto graduate from high school in 2004, enlisted in Army, trained in helicopter electronics.

- 01:20:00 While Sixto was in the Army, Gilberto and Yolanda visited him in Virginia on a regular basis. The couple reunited at that time and had another child.
- 01:21:00 The couple's second child, Chamayo, was premature and born with serious health problems. He was hospitalized for an extended period of time after he was born.
- 01:29:00 The period of hospitalization was difficult for the family. Yolanda spoke little English and Gilberto had to translate for her. At first, Gilberto couldn't tell who was the responsible doctor. They also experienced discrimination from some hospital staff. On one occasion the police were called.
- 01:33:00 Gilberto used experiences like this to advise other people how to stand up for themselves. He noted that many people, Hispanics, blacks and poorly educated whites, are afraid to be assertive and are taken advantage of. There is a lot of discrimination in Iowa, even though it's illegal.
- 01:35:00 While Chamayo was in the hospital Gilberto stayed at the Ronald McDonald House. The staff wanted to charge him \$800/week, but he protested saying that he wasn't as rich as the other people who were there, pointing out their expensive cars. The director intervened and let him stay for free.
- 01:38:00 He was also treated disrespectfully by staff at Chamayo's physical therapy appointment.
- 01:44:00 Gilberto stood up for others too. Called in sick at IBP, travelled to Omaha to help friend with immigration problem. Helped many others with unemployment claims.
- 01:46:00 Advised a co-worker who was being denied restroom breaks just to pee in his pants to see what happens then. USDA inspector shut down the line.
- 01:47:00 Different standards applied at IBP depending on race and nationality.
- 01:49:00 Told the supervise that, "you don't provoke someone unless you are sure you are 100% right."
- 01:50:00 Began recording conversations with Chamayo's doctors because he believed that he was less likely to be believed in the event of a dispute

about what had been said. Friend told him about construction job in Iowa City, close to Chamayo's hospital.

- 01:52:00 Noticed that the white construction workers liked to smoke a lot, drink coffee and listen to music and made the Mexican workers do all the work.
- 01:53:00 Dealt with hostile supervisors. His philosophy is to be a mirror. "I'll treat you like you treat me."
- 01:57:00 Gilberto's sense of justice developed after he took a psychology class that made him think about fairness, verbal personal attacks. Also influenced by training and experiences at McDonald's.
- 01:59:30 Black customer became angry and abuse when Hispanic worked could not understand his order. He wanted a "malt" but on the McDonald's menu it's called a shake. The customer thought the server should have known what he meant.
- 02:02:00 Meatpacking work was very difficult for Hispanic people. Gilberto estimated that IBP hired 400 workers per week at Columbus Junction, but only a few of them lasted through the first week. They weren't used to hostile supervisors or the relentless pace of the conveyor.
- 02:03:00 The work was also hard for other immigrants, including Vietnamese. No one understands at first how important it is to keep you knife sharp.
- 02:04:00 There were many injuries, tendonitis, accidents, fatigue, difficulties working in extremes of temperature
- 02:05:00 At IBP Gilberto observed that management rotated the workers between jobs to avoid the impact of repetitive motion, but immigrant workers were less likely to be rotated. Some of the Vietnamese workers were too small to handle the physically demanding jobs to which they were assigned.
- 02:11:00 Gilberto spoke with Hispanic workers from West Liberty Foods (a turkey processing plant) who told him that discrimination was common there also.
- 02:13:00 In 2009, Gilberto lost his home and moved to Forest View (a mobile home park in Iowa City). He split up with Yolanda again.
- 02:14:00 Gilberto was pleased to discover services and support available for handicapped son, but frustrated that not everyone knew how to obtain them.

Part 2 of 2

- 00:03:15 Gilberto was affected by Sixto's deployment to Afghanistan.
- 00:04:50 Parents should be a safety net for their children.
- 00:06:45 After deployment, Sixto moved in with Gilberto. Discussion of events of Sixto's childhood, being a "punk."
- 00:11:00 Loves to cook, especially Mexican and Chinese. Never eat Mexican food in restaurants. Not really Mexican and too expensive.
- 00:18:00 Sixto nearly involved in drive-by shooting in Ottumwa
- 00:21:45 Yolanda and two sons now in San Diego, Gilberto depressed by this. Sixto doing well working at very fancy restaurant.
- 00:22:30 Laid off from construction work along with lots of others, because of recession. Worked on (University) Recreation Center, Vetro Hotel, Coralville Library.
- 00:24:00 Injured in accident while pouring concrete in parking ramp project. Foreman was installing rebar every 18 inches (which is what blueprints specified) but should have been every 4 inches. Floor collapsed while concrete being poured.
- 00:26:30 Choice of words is important. Better to say, "initiate legal action," instead of "sue you". "Whatever" means "yes."
- 00:33:00 It's important to stand up to bullies. Surveillance cameras sometimes are a good thing. Description of bar fight in Iowa City. Police involved. Learned that you can't fight back until you've been hit twice. Told other people about this rule.
- 00:40:00 Recently found out he was diabetic. Had already stopped drinking. Was a "social drinker". Drank when he went out. Usual limit three beers.
- 00:42:00 Still bothered by discrimination. Checker at Walmart let white person cut in line ahead of him. Server at Olive Garden treated Gilberto and his sister, brother-in-law disrespectfully. Has developed responses to this kind of treatment.
- 00:50:30 Studied to be school bus driver. Was very stressful, aggravated diabetes.
- 00:52:30 Had to pass medical exam to get job.

- 00:53:00 Chamayo injured due to inattention while being transported on school bus. Very distressing. Also had bruises which school principal claimed were self-inflicted.
- 01:00:00 Making \$12/hour, 20 hours/week as school bus driver. So much stress, working like a zombie.
- 01:01:00 Injured in accident. Woman ran through stop sign and ran into bus. Gilberto did not see her coming, caught off guard. X-ray and CAT scan showed nothing broken but can't walk, in pain, weak as a baby. Off work for 5 days, then physical therapy. School sent him to same doctor that had treated him for other on-the-job injuries.
- 01:05:00 Went to Mexico and got an MRI. They are much cheaper there. Mexican doctor identified nature of injury. 3-4 herniated disks in lower back.
- 1:06:00 Doctors have lots of power. They can say what's right and wrong. Have the power to make you obey. Despite serious pain and disability, given only a 5% disability rating. Person that hit him was an important person in the courthouse.
- 1:10:00 Another driver with a much less serious injury received more compensation than Gilberto.