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Alexandria Community Media

Historic Alexandria oral history interviews have lasting impact

In 2015, The Office of Historic Alexandria received a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities for a project titled "Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future."

The project led Historic Alexandria to conduct and transcribe oral history interviews with 20 new Alexandrians from all over the world. That group included six participants from Latin American countries. Since then, the Alexandria Oral History Center has continued its work in the Latin American community, interviewing community members born in the United States and elsewhere.

PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

The Office of Historic Alexandria has built up a portfolio of oral history interviews with Latin American residents.

A highlight of the Oral History Center's Online Archive is a 2023 interview with City Councilor Canek Aguirre, the first Latino member of City Council. The interview covers Aguirre's childhood in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Highland Park, his college years at UNC-Chapel Hill and his life in Alexandria.

Since the Immigrant Alexandria project, other organizations have also collected oral histories from recent arrivals to northern Virginia from Latin America. From March 21 to Sept. 7, the Virginia Museum of History and Culture displayed "We the People: The World in Our Commonwealth."

The online version of the exhibit is still on the museum's website. It includes a collection of oral histories in video format, including the story of a woman who came to Virginia from Bolivia.

Virginia Commonwealth University also has a repository of oral history interviews with members of Virginia's Latin American community. Started in 2023 as part of its public history lab, run by Professor Daniel Morales, the Latino Virginia Project highlights the lives of Virginians from Latin American backgrounds. The Latino Virginia Project also gives undergraduate and graduate students training in oral history research.

Ten years after the Office of Historic Alexandria's Immigrant Alexandria project, the collection of oral history interviews in northern Virginia's Latin American community continues. Aguirre notes part of the new focus on the Virginia Latin American community in his interview:

"... In this area, you're talking about the Latino population that really didn't start getting here until late '70s, early '80s. You had some in the early '70s, but not that many. And, it's kind of hit a critical mass point where, you know, folks have graduated from high school. Have graduated from college. Have started businesses. They're starting to get elected."

With that in mind, we encourage readers to check out these oral history interviews as we celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month.

The Virginia Museum of History and Culture's online exhibit We the People is available at virginiahistory.org/exhibitions/we-the-people. The Virginia Commonwealth University Latino Virginia interviews are available at latinovirginia.vcu.edu/interviews/.

Readers can learn more about Hispanic Heritage Month in Alexandria at alexandriava.gov/hispanicheritage. To find out more about the Alexandria Oral History Center, please visit alexandriava.gov/historic-alexandria/program/the-alexandria-oral-history-center.

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