

VOICES OF EQUITY PODCAST

Episode 1 Season 2

VICTOR LEANDRY

DR. DENISE DOUGLAS: (0:00)

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FEMALE VOICE (singing): (0:12)

We are the voices of equity podcast. We are the voices of equity podcast listen up ...ooh ... ooh...ooh...ooooh listen up.

MUSIC: (0:32)

(Inaudible)

DR. DENISE DOUGLAS: (0:36)

Thank you for joining us for the Voices of Equity Podcasts at Lorain County Community College. We are your Co-hosts Denise Douglas...

KIONNA MCINTOSH-PHARMS: (0:44)

...And Kionna McIntosh-Pharms.

DR. DOUGLAS: (0:46)

As the Co-chairs for the Equity by Design team at LCCC, we are excited to share the work of this team, the voices of those who do this work, and the voices of the students who are the reason for our work. We are actually now in Hispanic Heritage Month from

September 15th, through October 15th. Today, we are joined by a very special guest Victor Leandry, Executive Director of El Centro. El Centro is a Latino, nonprofit advocacy organization serving greater Lorain County. I also have the privilege of serving on the board, Victor, welcome to the podcast.

VICTOR LEANDRY: (1:21)

Well, thank you. Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here,

KIONNA (1:23)

Mr. Victor. Thank you so much for being with us today. I had the privilege of meeting you when I was a student Senator in the student leadership Institute, it's a natural and complete circle to have you come back to us. Would you share more about yourself and El Centro.

VICTOR: (1:41)

First, let me say, um, what a great story. This is, what LCCC does the best. Somebody that was a student here and now working for LCCC, especially at minority. That is what they do the best. So, congratulations to you and congratulations to LCCC too. In regards to myself, I am Puerto Rican. Sometimes I say that I was born in Puerto Rico, but it's that I forget sometimes that I was born in Atlanta, Georgia. Both of my parents are Latinos from Puerto Rico, but my father was drafted to the military for the Korean war and then Vietnam. So, we were all born in different military base. So, I was born in Fort Gordon, in Augusta, Georgia, but I was the I'm the youngest one of four. So, my father retired when I was five and we moved to Puerto Rico, but my parents separated and I grew up very poor with my mom, single mom. And I've seen the projects in Puerto Rico, very violent community in, in my town. One of the biggest towns in Puerto Rico. When I was 14 or 15, and the council didn't know what to do with me because I was the youngest council ever in, in that community. But that was my initial stage of social work. So, I went to the Catholic University for Social Work, and then I moved here in 1991, uh, looking for the American dream. Then I did my master's at Cleveland State University in Social Work. And I've been the director for El Centro for 17 years. So, if I can, I also would like to talk about this

organization that I, that I lead called El Centro that is known as the Latino social services. But now recently I've been referring to ourselves as the bilingual bicultural social services because we are not only serving Latinos. And a lot of people think that we serve Latino. We have become like, like a one stop here in Lorain County for nonprofit. And a lot of the foundations talk to about us as a one stop and a very unique nonprofit here in the county. Because most of the nonprofit specialize in something very specific, we have like a one stop. Uh, and we serve from kids to older adults and everything in between. I have to say the partnership with LCCC, is it has been very strategic and very amazing. Since the beginning of El Centro, even before my time. So, we have the pleasure to have Dr. Church, uh, way back in the day as one of our board members. And then Dr. Marcia Ballinger also was in our board and, and just stepped down, uh, like last year. And that's when Denise came on board. So, thank you Denise for serving in our board. We are recognized here in Lorain County and also in the state of Ohio as one of those lead Latino social services, because of, like I said, the reputation that we have in regards to partnership, but also because of the services that we provide. We provide the services in four different department. One of the departments is the community health and supportive services. Anybody going to El Centro first go through that department. That's the department that connect people with different services, whether it's inside or outside. They manage the 211 for United Way in Spanish, the mental health navigator line, the county prevention, uh, services. You name it. Immigration services are in this department. Senior services are in that department. So that's like the gate, very busy department. They're all interpreters for Mercy Health for medical appointments. Uh, we have another department that is common to the department. That's the food pantry. They have English classes with LCCC. LCCC provide English classes in our building. They do home buyer classes, seminars. They do, uh, financial literacy. There's another department that not a lot of people know, but we have a department that is called Money Management. Those are representatives that pay for individuals with severe mental illness. We have approximately 300 individuals in Lorain County from white, African American, Latinos that are struggling with mental health issues. They can live in our community and be part of our society, but they cannot manage their social security. These are individuals that people take advantage of them and take their money away, whether family members or

neighbors. These are people that might have dual diagnosis that still have a problem with alcohol or drugs and are using their money that way. So social security make us to represent the pay and we're in charge to manage their social security. And the last program is youth services. We have the 231 collaborative with United Way and is, uh, is focused on career exploration. So, we do a lot with LCCC through that program to bring in our kids, to be exposed to the lab here, to the culinary yard and different programs. And other than that, we do a lot of collaborations. Like we have collaborations with, with mental health agencies that go to El Centro and improve our services. So, the list is super long in regard to collaboration.

MUSIC: (6:10)

KIONNA: (6:16)

I'm telling you everything that you just shared, you talked about the struggle and poverty that some of us, most of us have experienced in our lives. You are a true testament to grit. We're very appreciative of that. You also talked about something that's near and dear to my heart, and that is the essence of community being our middle name at Lorain County Community College and how our partnerships make a huge difference. It takes a village by us working together. We certainly can overcome and help this community and uplift it for the betterment of the community. And I just really appreciate all of that information that you stated, the partnerships, all of that. So, the thing is that we mentioned earlier that we are celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month, El Centro partnered with the Lorain Historical, Oberlin College and leaders in the community to preserve the history of the Latino community in Lorain. It is a free exhibit at Lorain Historical Society that I would encourage our listeners to go and see, of course, would you share more about this particular project and its importance to Lorain County?

VICTOR: 4: (07:27)

Um, two years ago before the pandemic, the director of the Lorain Historical Society, her name is Barbara Piscopo, contact me and, and say, Victor, I have a project in mind. I want to run it by you. Fortunate for us, we don't have, we have never had collected the

history of the Latino community in the city as a Lorain Historical Society. The Latino community always show up in different exhibits, but it's just mentioned here and there, but we have never captured the history. And I wonder we can partner with you. We don't know, we don't have the expertise of the Latino community and I wonder can partner. And that has been always in my mind, but we have so many projects in El Centro that we kept pushing that one down and down. But immediately, as soon as she mentioned that, like I was on board, I was like, let's do this. And we form a committee made of different committee leaders and different organization. And LCCC is part of this committee. So, it's a big committee that was formed to start capturing the history of the Latino community. So that big committee worked through the last two years organizing different events. So, this was not even the first one, but unfortunately, we started back on February and the pandemic, uh, hit in March. So, this committee has been working via Zoom in virtually having been working face to face. So, the work has been a little bit slow but in two years, we have done three major projects. Um, the first project was with, uh, Oberlin College. One of the classes started a oral history page. Part of the assignment of the student is to interview leaders in our community and post in this webpage that is Latino or history student Lorain County. So that was the first step. The second step. Last year, we did a toolkit for educators. The third one is this exhibit this year that we decided with all this information that we had collected and all those oral history interviews, uh, we started putting a, this is the first exhibit we are hoping it's not the last one, but it's the first exhibit celebrating a hundred years. And we are first representation of the Latino community in this county was from the Mexican community. They came to work in the US in 1921. So, we're celebrating, uh, 100 years now followed by the Puerto Ricans that came in the 1940s with a pilot project through the US as well. They needed, uh, manpower. They decided to do this project and go to Puerto Rico and hire 500 Puerto Ricans. It went so well that the Puerto Ricans were moving here to work at the US but also at the four companies that were enabled in Lorain. So, our Latino community here in Lorain were well known in the United States for the place for Latinos to make decent money back in the forties and the place where Latino could go and make some money and work. Uh, so people in the United States that know about history in the Latino community know Lorain because of that. Unfortunately, that's not the case now, but, uh, people know I have the

pleasure to sit in a national board for Latinos, uh, several years ago, and everybody knew Lorain. They were like, that was the first thing they say. That was the place in the forties for Latinos to go and make money.

MUSIC: (10:31)

KIONNA: (10:38)

As stated before, I certainly would encourage our listeners to go and see this exhibit. It sounds like it's gonna be a wealth of information and history that we need to continue to cherish and make sure as stated before that we do continue to uplift our communities. We talked about Dr. Church, Dr. Ballinger, and now Dr. Douglas, and I can assure you that this won't be just the third exhibit and it won't be just this one time to share because you have those individuals in your corner, and we will continue to certainly increase this partnership. And again, listeners go see this exhibit.

VICTOR: (11:17)

Yes. And if I may, it is in the Lorain Historical Society Carnegie Center address is 329 West 10th Street in Lorain is right downtown Lorain. Uh, and the exhibit will be open on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturday until October 30th, even though Latino heritage month ends on October 15th, we're gonna be running in this exhibit until October 30th, from 10:00 AM to 3:00 PM and it is free. So please go and have some time to read about the Vine Avenue. We dedicated the exhibit to the Vine Avenue. It was the place for Latino to go and congregate. And, even though it's true, Vine Avenue, is not what it was back then, we are celebrating, the life of Vine Avenue.

DR. DOUGLAS: (12:01)

One of the pleasures of being on serving on the board of El Centro is just learning about the history of our Hispanic, Latino population in Lorain County. One of the things that I learned not too long ago, and it may not be common knowledge, but Lorain County has one of the largest Latino populations in the state. And, actually Victor's probably gonna share exactly what that is. But one of the things I really appreciated learning more recently

is your work with local law enforcement agencies to talk more about and provide information that's culturally relevant on the Latino community. Would you share more about this?

VICTOR: (12:39)

We are per capita. We are the largest city in Ohio making Lorain city, the largest per capita, Latino community in Ohio. County wise we were number third, the census 2010. But I predicted that we were gonna be first in the census 2020, and the newspaper were calling me. I remember on August 14, as soon as the census released the first set of numbers, the newspaper calling me, asking me if I was surprised, I was like, I've been saying it for the last two or three years that I was predicting this. So, and they were like, I think you're the only one that are not surprised, like we predicted for Centro. So, El Centro with the new numbers are now, we are the largest city per capita in the largest county per capita in the state of Ohio Latino community. And the numbers have increased all Latinos have moved not only from Lorain, in the past, we used to not be known as being concentrated in Lorain, but there was an article in the Chronicle on August, August 14, that talk about how much the Latino community had grown in Lorain County and the cities that they have seen increase. For example, Amherst saw a 5.5 increase in Latino over a 0.6, increased 3.8, a Avon Lake 11.6 increase in Latinos, a Avon 17.2 Latinos in Ridgeville 19.7 increase on Latinos. So, and then lists keep going on east Eastern township 1.4 in Latino, Colombia township 5.3. So, La Grange. I mean, cities that you will not think, but the biggest one was Elyria. Our Latino community is moving toward Elyria. And this happened after the hurricane Maria. People were coming and choosing to move to Elyria. In the past, the trend was that they would move to Lorain and then moved to Elyria. Now they're coming straight from Puerto Rico moving to Elyria, so that community's growing as well.

MUSIC: (14:37)

VICTOR : (14:43)

When I saw that and, and thinking on that, I started thinking on the law enforcement and, thinking on how could we help law enforcement to start looking at the trends and getting prepared for that? And my first contact was like two or three years ago. The Elyria police department contact me and asked me for help in regards to understanding the culture and all this community that is growing in Elyria. But most recently, and most recently listen to me two years ago before the pandemic, in 2019, the highway patrol has a new lieutenant here for this county, and he's an African American, but the first thing he did was asking to meet with me and, get more knowledge about the Latino community that I thought it was so genuine. And so, authentic that we had a conversation, we sat down for almost two hours talking about that Latino community. And he was so surprised to learn about how big we are and everything that's going on in our Latino community here, that it was one of those moments that we were looking at each other. And he's like, if I'm learning this, I can imagine this had to be also news for some of my officers. So, and it was that moment that we look each other and he's like, could we do have training? And I's like, yes, but the beauty of this was that we never met thinking on a training. It was more of let's meet each other. Let's get to know each other, let's get to know how could we help each other from, from the highway path and El Centro and the person of the highway and the community. And this was in January 2019. So that was before the pandemic, and that was also before the George Floyd incidents. So, I like to mention this because there was such good collaboration before it was needed, this kind of training that, that incident brought to life how much this kind of training is needed that people need to, on the understand law enforcement need to understand and, and have a knowledge of their community and each community is different. So, it is a very important, I believe my personal opinion is that each law enforcement need to know about their own community and understand that community and the history and everything else. So, so for two years, we've been planning this, for the highway patrol very specific. It's not a traditional cultural diversity training. It is a training, very specific for law enforcement, giving them a few tools on how they can make that first interaction, a more comfortable and friendly interaction for both parties, for the person that is being stopped and by the police. So, so we just launched the first training a few weeks ago and it went wonderful. I think we've been covered by almost all the newspaper, but it was never our intention, but we've been

covered by all, almost all the new, newspapers and TV channels. And now we're looking at offering that training to other law enforcements here, in the county.

MUSIC: (17:38)

DR. DOUGLAS: (17:43)

It's absolutely wonderful. And what I love that you shared with us, which was it's really about the connection and the relationship, and really getting to understand each side of that story is really critical. And I think that's what I love about the Voices of Equity podcasts. We start to learn about the stories that are so important to our community and learn about each other. So thank you for sharing that work that you're doing.

VICTOR: (18:08)

Definitely a pleasure. It's a pleasure. And, if I can mention something about that training, it's like, it's like, for example, in this training, we talk about the, the names of Latinos and, and the, and the challenge that we go as Latino when we move to the United States. In regards to our names and how that, for some police that doesn't understand how our name change when we move year and the complications of that, you know, when they stop somebody and do that first search in their computer, a Latino can come with different, like four or five different names. And it's not that the Latinos trying to hide something or get away with something. It's just that the system and the different culture sometimes make this kind of challenge for Latinos who don't know any English, how to complete forms, when you are coming from a culture that you carry your father, last name and your mother, last name you carry. So, for example, in Puerto Rico, you look at all my papers and you come from a culture that middle names are also very, very important because you are named by your parents. So, you have the same name as your parents. So, the middle name is very important. So, in Puerto Rico, I remember from my first 25 years, I was Victor Louis Leandry Vasquez. My mom's Sur name show up in all my documents from school. But then you move here, and you have to drop your mom first name, and some forms don't even allow you for the middle name . So right here, you look at all my diplomas and everything else. I'm Victor Louis. So, I lost my middle name, and I lost my

mom's name. But the challenge with this is that people, that, lose I knew a little bit of English and I knew what I needed. But when you think about the last name, when you move here and you're learning English last mean the, the end of a sequence. So, when you are learning English and you literally translating, and you don't know English, and you are seen in a form that asking you for the last name, people and even professionals that are filling on documents for our Latinos, go to their mother last name, because it's the last one in that sequence, and that's not your father surname. So, it's a problem that start rolling. And then you see Latinos having different name in different in the welfare or in the DMV or in the school system, in the health system. And when you realize they have different and all over, and it's a challenge, we do, we deal with that a lot in El Centro helping people put their other records together in the same in getting one name,

KIONNA. (20:30)

Switching gears a little bit, though. I do wanna share that or let me say it in the correct manner mi abuela was from Cuba. Yeah. And so, you know, I consider myself a melted pot, but I certainly do appreciate all of the history, all of the, the commonalities that we share as people of color. Yes. There's obstacles there's different things. But when it's time to celebrate, it's time to celebrate! So in that breath, what is your favorite way to celebrate Hispanic heritage month?

VICTOR: (21:07)

That is a question that is very difficult for me to answer. And I talk a lot and, you know, I talk a lot. I am in the different role because I'm being the, I am the director of the Latino organization here, Hispanic heritage month for me, means a lot of presentations, from presentations. Uh, like I'm gonna be leading a panel for Mental health, in as to I'm gonna do a presentation here at LCCC next, in next week. So I do a lot of presentation in the community, so it's very busy. So, and I love that. I love that the community want to learn about the Latino community. So, I celebrate that way. That that moment become very busy, but it's in a, in a good way. People, we, it is, it's the time for us to share our story. And it is, it is good. Personally, I like watching TV and, and seeing all these specials that are well done, in regards to the Latino community, celebrating our contribution. And that

is something that we don't see as minority. We don't see often, you know, seeing specials dedicated to our communities, you know, and so that for that month I, I really, really like watching that. I just saw one in ABC that it was well done, like two weeks ago. And, those are the things that I look forward to. And then last thing that I like is that for the month, I feel supported. Being a minority in the United States in a time where equity is moving backward in a time where in the United States, equity is moving backwards, as a minority, you feel like you have a chip in your shoulder and it's conscious unconsciously. You wake up every day thinking on challenges that you go through that not everybody go, or you should not be going through.

DR. DOIUGLAS: (22:52)

Yes. Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing your heart. And I concur it's, it's good to feel supported and you know that you have a lot of friends here at LCCC beyond Hispanic heritage month for sure. Absolutely. So, thank, I want to thank you Victor for joining us today. It was great to spend time with you. I also want to, thank our listeners for joining us for this episode of the Voices of Equity Podcast at LCCC brought to you by Boom Radio.

MUSIC: (23:22)

KIONNA: (23:28)

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