

**Deborah Espinosa**

**Oral History Memoir**

**Interviewed by Pablo Mora**

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**Colorado State University-Pueblo**

**University Archives and Special Collections**

**MORA:** I'm Pablo Mora. Today I am interviewing Deborah Espinosa. The interview is taking place at the campus of the Colorado State University-Pueblo. The interview is sponsored by the CSU-Pueblo University Archives and Special Collections and is part of the Southern Colorado Ethnic Heritage and Diversity Archives Project. I wanted to confirm that Ms. Espinosa--

**ESPINOSA:** Yes.

**MORA:** understands that this interview is being recorded and that this recording will be preserved at the CSU-Pueblo University Archives.

**ESPINOSA:** I understand that.

**MORA:** Alright, well, thank you. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, Deborah?

**ESPINOSA:** Sure, sure. I've lived in Pueblo over 30 years. I originally come from the Western Slope. I grew up in Grand Junction. I went school in Boulder and actually finished up here at this University my last year. Juan [my husband] graduated before I did, so, I always liked Pueblo. I had family here and this looked like a great place to start an alternative newspaper called *La Cucaracha*, so, we settled here, [and] raised our children here.

**MORA:** What has your career path been?

**ESPINOSA:** I studied history, so I have my B.S. from this campus and then I went on to get my Masters from Regis University in Non-profit Management. I went into the museum field. I was the director of El Pueblo History Museum and worked for History Colorado for 25 years, so--

**MORA:** You're no longer with them?

**ESPINOSA:** I'm working part time for them to co-curate a show on the Chicano Movement which will open in 2015, but I technically retired not too long ago. So, that's been my career. I chose a non-profit degree because we were growing the museum. It grew twice when we had to cap the campaign, the master plan and new construction, and though I would've loved more history, that really helped a number of ways. So, I'm glad to say that I do have that.

**MORA:** We were taking a survey of sentiments, opinions and everything else about Christopher Columbus. Now, what he is famed for in history books--

**ESPINOSA:** Right.

**MORA:** is for discovering the New World. But, in recent years, in Pueblo and in Colorado and the United States, Christopher Columbus has become quite controversial.

**ESPINOSA:** Right.

**MORA:** Can you tell us your remembrances of how this state of affairs came to be?

**ESPINOSA:** Well, informally, as we received our educations, of course, and being in the field of history, it was very questionable that Christopher Columbus was legitimate as a discoverer and first to discover the Americas. Finally it became more of a topic to organize around during the bicentennial or the quincennial, excuse me.

**MORA:** What year would that be?

**ESPINOSA:** Oh, was that 1992? That makes sense.

**MORA:** Ok, it was the 5th; I don't even know how to say that word, quincennial--

**ESPINOSA:** Uh, huh.

**MORA:** of the Columbus Day observation. What occurred then, in your recollection?

**ESPINOSA:** Oh, there were lots of celebrations across the country in recognition of his so-called discovery. Lots of monies were made available to people to celebrate and to have programs, etc. But, it was also a time to really bring some scholarship to it and there was another level of discussion about whether or not this kind of thinking could proceed and clearly it shouldn't. But, it's met, as you say, with a lot of a controversy and resistance.

**MORA:** What was the controversy over?

**ESPINOSA:** Well, the fact that there's a lot of erroneous information being given to the American people, or people of the Americas actually. And it's reinforced in our schools, which is a deliberate attempt to disguise the truth, discredit other people who were here before Columbus and really to perpetuate a myth that upholds the ideal that this man was so farsighted, and such a visionary, and such a courageous explorer, that he went against all odds and the known scientific

thought of that day to push forward, in his voyage, to this continent, which he never even landed on. He did not find India. We know all of these facts now.

But, there's even more to consider or to look into [such as] the possibility that he wasn't Italian, and possibly a Jew, possibly in hiding because of the--you know, the Jews had been expelled from Spain in 1492. So, all of this was taking place. This was a very dangerous time for people. So, all of these are still being looked into. What this does [is] it robs the Italians of this hero that they were handed on a silver platter, so to speak. So, they take great offense to that, especially if they don't look into the history. If they choose to follow that line of thinking, then they will remain angry. Some are becoming more enlightened and realize that there has been a falsehood, spread across the country for about a hundred years.

**MORA:** Will you discuss what that falsehood is?

**ESPINOSA:** Well--

**MORA:** [or] what his true legacy should be?

**ESPINOSA:** Well, that's a good question. I think he was certainly a good sailor [and] a very good salesman. A very good organizer, if you will. He had to convince the king and queen, Isabella and Ferdinand, to finance this voyage. But, in reality, people had been on these voyages before. Now, authors [and] historians are beginning to put forth that it was a known fact that Columbus even knew this, because he had, for instance, some of the Chinese maps that they had when they reached the continent. And, other groups, the Africans, you know, were here, even before the Chinese, so--

**MORA:** What are the implications of having a bad historical record of Columbus?

**ESPINOSA:** It does a disservice to the Native people. All the way around, it is a disservice to the Native people at the expense of their history. They have created a new history, and that's the injustice of it.

**MORA:** Do you believe that's what sparked the controversy here in Colorado?

**ESPINOSA:** Yes, yes, yes.

**MORA:** Colorado was the first state to declare a Columbus Day holiday in 1906 and it was adopted nationally [in] 1907.

**ESPINOSA:** Right.

**MORA:** And up till then there had been no controversy, up until 1992 that you talk about, the quincentennial celebration--

**ESPINOSA:** Right, right.

**MORA:** or observance.

**ESPINOSA:** Don't forget when the immigrants arrived here, they had to work for their own place in this country. There was lots of prejudice towards various groups, the Irish [and] the Italians as they arrived, and, so, everyone is looking for acceptance and they work hard for that. The Italians worked for their home and their dream like anyone else. But, they were not always treated well. When they created the Christopher Columbus myth, this country was really looking towards achieving a comfort level with colonization. So, who better than to make Christopher Columbus the icon of colonization and that, as Americans, that is the right and just thing to do-- that it's ok to do that to another country and to people. So, the Indians were already colonized, as well, as the Mestizos among the Native people or --

**MORA:** What is a Mestizo? I'm sorry--

**ESPINOSA:** A Mestizo is a person that is both Spanish and Indian. When the Spanish came to this continent, they intermarried and 'conquered' the Indians and colonized them, so a new race of people were born. Our ancestors. We're Mestizos.

**MORA:** One of the flashpoint between two separate groups of immigrants. Why do they argue over Columbus?

**ESPINOSA:** Well, because the Native people are deeply injured spiritually and have been for hundreds of years. They were captured, tortured. Their language was taken away. Their history was taken away. Their religion [and] their art was disregarded. What more harm can you do to a people than to strip them of their past, their knowledge, their legacies, and to leave them to believe that they have nothing, are nothing, and can contribute nothing. And they are easily enslaved, manipulated. So, that's the harm that colonization does to people and the repercussions. The harm is felt for generations, for centuries, and that's the case here. That is an injury that still afflicts people. So, to hold this mythical history up as an ideal is a slap in the face. It's an insult. It's a stab to the heart. And, so, it can't be tolerated.

**MORA:** What is your involvement then, locally here in Pueblo?

**ESPINOSA:** As a historian, I'm going to certainly take a good look at this. There are lots of histories that need to be reexamined and told truthfully and this is among them. As a professional, I'm going to speak out against this falsehood and so-called history.

**MORA:** Well, then, it's the problematic nature of the celebration? Italian Americans consider it a day of pride? Or is it with the nature of Columbus?

**ESPINOSA:** Well, yes, they do consider it a day of pride and we have always said from the beginning this is not against the Italian people. It is against the myth. We want truth in education. We want the textbooks to reflect the history of the Native people, not a one-sided view of how 'helpless' we were and how benevolent the conquerors are, because that's not true.

But they don't separate that, because it is their legacy. Christopher Columbus and the fact that the statue was established here and the first holiday, it's very engrained in this community. We realize that. How doesn't a community of people, an empowered people, have a voice? They have to seize that voice. They have to take action, and they have to protest. That is exactly what has taken place here in Pueblo. It is all a legitimate, legal protest against the false history, not against the Italian people. But they are very insulted [by] the presence of this protest in Pueblo. We've worked with them and we've talked with them. We've met around the tables with them to negotiate a safe day--

**MORA:** Describe those conversations, would you please?

**ESPINOSA:** Well, certainly. It started with the protests, and at one point there was an evening spaghetti dinner that we used to protest. But, really, that was a legislative dinner. We've walked away from that. The real issue became the morning commemoration and the wreath laying on the statue and the commemoration of the holiday.

**MORA:** And this was brought up during these conversations?

**ESPINOSA:** Well, yes, of course. Leading to that though, myself and Rita Martinez approached--I believe it was Billings at the time--

**MORA:** Police Chief James Billings.

**ESPINOSA:** Right. Thank you. To suggest that we have some community meetings. Alright. And, it took a while for that--

**MORA:** What year would this be?

**ESPINOSA:** I don't recall and I don't want to guess. I would have to go back and take a look but, generally speaking, it took some time and we began to invite people to the table. My experience with non-profit work is that when you have a conflict and you come to the table, you have a stage of differentiation; everything is put on the table. We were very honest with each other. There were educators around the table. There was a Catholic Priest, an attorney, local businessmen and of course, police detectives and, Chief Billings. Then [there were] the activists, the protesters, as well. And we were very honest with each other. They wanted to know why we had to protest. We would say things [like] "well, it's our American right" to do that. The revolution started with protest. That's our right as American citizens. But people take great issue with protests and marches unless, of course, they agree with the protesters. That's just common.

So, we tried to get at the history. We focused on the history. These were not easy sessions. We met several times. The other part of these meetings was to ensure our peoples' safety, and fairness in the protesters. There's not been fairness in regard to the protesters. If you were to ask the public, generally speaking, or at least it's my impression, that people feel very sorry for the

Italians. They're the victims in this and those Indians out there and those Mexicans, why don't they go back to Mexico? They're not even Indian. Why are they involved? They're just troublemakers.

So, the sympathies go with the Italians and it carries over into the media. So, we're portrayed as being the troublemakers, very rude. I feel like we have gotten better about articulating our stance. We could still protest. It was also very insulting to the psyche of people because in their minds, they don't have the education and the knowledge of this true history.

So, they take great offense to comparisons of Christopher Columbus to Adolph Hitler--a mother raper, etc, etc. So, that didn't help, but it was necessary in the beginning to grab the media, you see what I'm saying? We're beyond that now.

In those first sessions, we challenged the Italians to a public debate based on the history and they declined. We kept reminding them that you need to focus on your culture. You need to focus on your true legacy, your immigration history, your authors, your artists and painters. You're being robbed of your own history and you don't even know it. The result of it was that they paid attention to that. But, we saw the formation, or the strengthening of, La Famiglia and the Sons of Italy, all fine and well. That's what multi-culturalism is. Ha! They got it, but they got it for the wrong reason. God bless them, they got it for the wrong reason.

**MORA:** What about the alternative forms of observances? Dia de la Raza?

**ESPINOSA:** El Dia de la Raza, yes.

**MORA:** What do you think of those?

**ESPINOSA:** I think it's wonderful. It is been a holiday in Mexico for a hundred years, just about, I believe. Very soon, we should be celebrating that centennial. They were led by--and I apologize, I can't re-recall this person's name. But he was a national figure, a very educated man, and he was a philosopher. He saw the injustice of this holiday. And, he easily convinced and educated people to that fact that they should not be celebrating Christopher Columbus in Mexico, an oppressor, but rather celebrating the Indigenous people who have claim to that as well, to their country and that history. So, El Dia de la Raza became the alternative. That is what we celebrate in Pueblo now.

**MORA:** What does that entail?

**ESPINOSA:** Education, education, education. We have invited strong speakers to come and educate our public. The audience is growing; it's getting more diverse. Italians are attending. Non-Hispanic, Indian, [and] Italian people are attending. So, were getting a more diverse audience who are stopping to say, "Hey, I need to listen to this. What's going on?" They're taking a more progressive approach and we bring a contemporary view to the current issues of

colonized people--the conservation of water and resources, the injustices of life on the reservations, and how we as a people have to protect the water, the air, so that we all survive.

**MORA:** In Pueblo, they tried this? Or some alternate form? We're a flashpoint for this controversy. Pueblo's one of the hottest spots.

**ESPINOSA:** Yes, yes.

**MORA:** I remember [the] American Indian Movement, activist Russell Means, a good friend of mine and a good man, and others coming here to Pueblo to speak specifically on this. So, when I tried the Dia de la Raza, or has it been tried?

**ESPINOSA:** Well, we do celebrate it but it's still not accepted by the majority of people here. Remember, as the Italians told us in one of the sessions, "we're winning the public relations war," and they seemed to be very satisfied with that. As long as they get the media on their side, they're winning the public relations war. But we are winning the truth war, if you will. We're winning on facts, historical facts. So, that will weigh out eventually. That will weigh out. It may be generational before we see a full Dia de la Raza, and it may not be called Dia de La Raza. It could be called Italian heritage day. We would be open to that--to celebrate the culture, the food, the arts, the authors, etc. etc., to see more education about the Italians. But, they're resistant to that, even though they do raise money for scholarships so that their children can go to the universities, etc. That's all fine and well, but, what are they learning in the universities? Is anybody asking them that?

**MORA:** Why do you think it's taken that format, that the indigenous and Chicano populations confront the Italian Americans at the statue? It's become a yearly routine with police barricades, lines drawn and stuff like that.

**ESPINOSA:** Yes.

**MORA:** Is that the proper way to do this or--?

**ESPINOSA:** It's the only way to do this at this point. We have our meetings with the Italian community and their representatives, which came to an end by the way, and did not end on a friendly note. We just reached an impasse, and some people walked and there was some retaliation from those meetings.

**MORA:** From a peacekeeping meeting?

**ESPINOSA:** To the Native side, from a peace keeping--

**MORA:** There were repercussions?

**ESPINOSA:** Yes, sir. Some people walked out of the meetings because they could not handle the level of discussion. A mistake was made on our part to bring other voices in who didn't start

at the beginning. They didn't go through that differentiation process. So, we were ready to talk about safety and negotiating a new holiday. Right, some new possibilities, some reconciliation, and more education in the schools, that we wanted to see, O.K. But, unfortunately, we agreed to disagree, and we signed a document. Agree to disagree, we protest--

**MORA:** We signed a document?

**ESPINOSA:** They lay their wreath. We, the people around the table who were the negotiators at that point and time.

**MORA:** Do you agree that this is the best avenue for expressing frustrations with the indigenous history or the depiction of the indigenous history in the Americas? Is this--

**ESPINOSA:** The protests?

**MORA:** Yes.

**ESPINOSA:** Well, that's a difficult question because we don't like the protests. They're very difficult for the organizers. Again, we have to consider safety [and] fairness and the Native protestors are not always treated well. There are barricades. We are made to look dangerous. You see what I'm saying?

**MORA:** Yes.

**ESPINOSA:** It's not easy for us, it's not easy for professional people to get out there. We believe that there are a lot of people who agree with us but they cannot walk that line because of their jobs, or because of, you know, some of their friends. you know, They don't want to. It's just a rocky road, even though they might support us silently. The protests are just necessary at this point. We hope that someday they can go away, but we have to come to the table again, so to speak.

**MORA:** Let's talk about that future. Do you see a resolution of this issue any time in the foreseeable future?

**ESPINOSA:** I don't know about the foreseeable future, but I certainly do. It does start here and it would speak well of Pueblo as a community to take a fair look at this situation and not just be reactionary to the newspapers. And write things that are so--

**MORA:** Explain that, "reactionary to the newspapers." I'm sorry.

**ESPINOSA:** Insulting. Uh, Letters to the editor get printed that are very insulting, because they don't understand our history.

**MORA:** Well, what is the media's role in this? Is there a media--?

**ESPINOSA:** Well, it should be balanced, first and foremost.

**MORA:** Is it?

**ESPINOSA:** No, we don't think there's fairness. However, we are being offered a little bit more of a--we've been offered the opportunity to write an op-ed piece, our view and we'll take advantage of that. But, it's never going to be fair when the publisher goes to the local civil rights commission and asks that the protests stop, that this is unfair, and that let's just throw some money at these people so that they will go away. And Rita Martinez's name comes up time after time. How can that be fair? How can that be fair?

**MORA:** Well, then--

**ESPINOSA:** And these are documented meetings.

**MORA:** What would be a just resolution of this conflict or is there one? Or perhaps--?

**ESPINOSA:** Well, I get tired of, of reporters--and not just print media--walking up to somebody and saying, "why are you here today?" And they'll get that, "well, Columbus was a liar and a thief, and this is unfair." That's what gets printed in the newspaper, when, on the other side, beautiful cultural pictures of the other side and their story's told in column inches. We get the sound bites and the photo that makes us look like pure and simple troublemakers--not intelligent people, not analytical people, not injured people looking for some reconciliation and healing.

**MORA:** Would you say that type of sensationalism has to change here?

**ESPINOSA:** I would hope to see that change. Dia de la Raza is all about that. That's why we bring in the speakers. We have had programs at the university and invited the public. We have been at the public library and have brought in our local historians and professors to present what was going on in the world. What was the context of that time, to talk about the monarchy in Spain, the inquisition of that time. Where were people's hearts and minds of that time for this to take place? You have to ex-, look at the big picture. We had presented that to the community; the opposing side has not nor have they attended. So, it's up to the community to make their choice and until they do the protests will continue, but Dia de la Raza is growing in credibility and people are beginning to listen. So, we're winning the war. And, I don't want to call it a war, I'm just taking another person's words, you know.

**MORA:** Thank you very much for speaking with us today.

**ESPINOSA:** You're more than welcome.