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2009

## An Interview with Dr. Joseph Rojas

An Oral History Conducted by Lisa Gioia-Acres

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Heart to Heart Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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All transcripts received minimal editing that included the elimination of fragments, false starts and repetitions in order to enhance the researcher's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases, photographic images accompany the collection and have been included in the bound edition of the interview.

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## Preface

Dr. Joseph Rojas, born 1933 in Alexandria, Louisiana, was the son of Joseph Edward Rojas and wife Carroll. He graduated high school at age 16 and entered Loyola University of the South. Two years later he was accepted at Louisiana State University School of Medicine, graduating with a medical degree in 1957. He interned at Charity Hospital and then completed his OB-GYN residency at Tulane University.

Several mentors worked with Dr. Rojas during his residency and he recalls learning surgical and bed-side skills from the likes of Dr. Lynn White and Dr. Fred Janson. He also remembers the very high volume of patients – up to 300 – that he and other residents saw daily.

Dr. Rojas married Mona Robicheaux, RN, during his residency and afterwards joined the Air Force. He and his family -- they eventually had six children -- were stationed at Nellis Air Force Base, arriving in Las Vegas in 1961. He was chief of OB-GYN and deputy hospital commander while at Nellis and then served as chief of OB-GYN at Southern Nevada Memorial Hospital until 1972. He later served as chief of staff at Women's Hospital and Valley Hospital, and was the first chief of staff at Summerlin Hospital.

Dr. Rojas also maintained a private practice outside of the hospital. His wife worked alongside him in his office, and they share memories and anecdotes of the patients they saw and the general atmosphere of the medical community. Both Joseph and Mona agree that Las Vegas hospitals were less racially segregated than the hospitals in Louisiana, and felt that the West was more open to integration.

In 1966 Dr. Rojas started the first OB-GYN residency in Nevada, which led to the development of the University of Nevada School of Medicine. He was a researcher, lecturer, teacher, and author. He earned many awards, including the Harold Feikes MD Award for Outstanding Physician in Clark County (2001), and the Nevada State Medical Association Distinguished Physician Award (1980). Dr. Rojas passed away in May of 2009, leaving behind an incredible legacy of service to the residents of Clark County.



**This is Lisa Gioia-Acres. Today is September 30th, 2008. I am here conducting an oral history interview with Dr. Joseph Rojas in his home here in Las Vegas. And this is for the UNLV oral history project Heart to Heart.**

**Hello, Dr. Rojas. Good to meet you.**

Good afternoon, Lisa.

**Dr. Rojas, will you please spell your last name for me?**

R-O-J-A-S.

**What is that origin?**

It's a Spanish name.

**I thought at first it was Rojas, but it's Rojas.**

Well, you can pronounce it with a J. It's been pronounced with a J for years.

**Very good. Dr. Rojas, what medicine did you practice here in Vegas?**

Gynecology primarily.

**When did you arrive in Las Vegas?**

1961.

**And where did you originate?**

New Orleans.

**Can you tell me about your early life? Talk about mom and dad and your growing up years just briefly.**

Well, my father died when I was 12. I didn't know my mother. She was gone. So I lived with an aunt. My brother and my sister and I grew up with an aunt. And I went to a very good high school, military high school, Jesuit Marines, and then to Loyola and then to LSU Medical School and then to Tulane for my specialty training.

**Would you like to talk at all about your mom and your dad's circumstances?**

No.

**Okay. The aunt that raised you -- was that a maternal or paternal aunt?**

It was paternal.

**For the record can you say what your aunt's name was?**

Anita Weber.



**And what year were you born?**

1933.

**So what took you on the path to medicine? From your early years in New Orleans and the circumstances, what took you on a path to become a doctor?**

Well, I liked the idea of taking care of people. I liked the idea of science primarily.

**Were you good in science as you were growing up?**

Yeah, I was very good in science.

**Did your brother and sister go into medicine?**

No, they didn't.

**So was your aunt in any way encouraging of it? Did they kind of lead you in the direction of medicine?**

No.

**Well, tell me, then, what prepared you to get into medical school?**

My high school.

**So in high school you knew that you wanted to be a doctor early on?**

Right.

**And did you know what kind of a doctor?**

No. I didn't have any idea.

**And then you went to college.**

Right.

**And what college did you go to?**

Loyola.

**And where is Loyola?**

New Orleans.

**Tell me what that experience was like? Was it difficult for you? Was it easy?**

No. I was young. I started college when I was 16.

**Did you really? Is there a history of geniuses in your family?**

No. I just got started early. Don't ask me why.

**What kind of courses do you recall taking back then?**



I took a lot of science courses. In fact, at the end of my first year I was teaching biology to the med techs.

**At 17.**

I was a lab assistant.

**And so things came easy for you.**

Terrible in language. Couldn't pass Spanish.

**Did you find that would have come in handy had you been able to speak Spanish?**

No. Well, it probably would have. But I never used it.

**How many years did you have to go to college?**

Two and a half.

**And then didn't you have to go on to medical school after that?**

Uh-huh.

**I'm getting my college knowledge from television. So isn't it a long --**

I got into college. It was during the Korean War. And I got into medical school when I was 18 and a half, very young.

**Very, very young. Were you a phenomenon back then?**

No. Well, I was the youngest one in my class, but I don't think I was a phenomenon.

**It sounds to me like you might have been.**

**Where did you go to medical school?**

LSU in New Orleans.

**So everything was pretty much based in New Orleans.**

**What preparation did you have to take to get into medical school back then versus what students have to do today?**

Well, I don't know. They have a lot to do now to get in medical school. Mine wasn't so bad because I had good grades and I had good letters of recommendation and I had a good track record.

**What tests did you have to take?**

None.

**What was that experience like in the medical school? Did you have to do pretty much the**



**same things they have students do today?**

Yeah. I think so. Same classes, same type of classes.

**And while you're in New Orleans is that where you did residency?**

I took my residency at the big hospital next to LSU and Tulane, Charity Hospital.

I have a lot of allergies. My voice sounds funny.

**Oh, no. You sound terrific.**

**So what year did you arrive in Las Vegas?**

1961.

**And what were the circumstances? What did you do between graduation from medical school and before coming to Vegas? What happened between then?**

I went to intern and did a three-year residency in OB/GYN.

**What was that experience like?**

Great.

**Can you elaborate a little?**

It was really, really good. Yeah. I enjoyed it very much.

**Did you have a mentor?**

I had several mentors. Yeah.

**Anybody that you'd like to mention?**

Well, Lynn White. He went to practice in Washington State. And the other one's from California, from Anaheim, and he's retired, Fred Janson.

**What kind of things did they teach you and encourage you?**

Surgical skills. How to talk to patients.

**What kind of things did they say about talking to patients?**

At Charity Hospital you have a volume of patients and you don't have time to -- we used to see 300 patients a day. It's true. Like a bunch of residents. It's a very large practice, 15,000 deliveries a year.

**And probably seeing all sorts of different conditions.**

Everything.

**Unbelievable. So what kind of advice did they give you about how to deal with such a high**



**volume of patients and still be compassionate?**

Nothing. They just showed me how they did it. Nothing specific.

**Then how did you end up coming to Las Vegas?**

Well, at that time physicians went into the military. It was 1961 and my chairman, the head of the department, was a retired brigadier general of the Air Force. He called in seven residents, three of whom had never been in the military. And he says, "Raise your right hand." And we did. And he said, "Well, you're in the military now."

**No choice about it?**

No.

**What was your feeling?**

That's all right. I'd have to go anyway. So it put us in the Air Force. And then they asked me where I'd like to go. And I told him a few places. He said those are three years. I said I don't want to go to Germany for three years. I want to go for two years. And he said the only place you can go for two years where you're going to be chief of the department is at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas. And I said where is that? I didn't even know where Las Vegas was. So I signed up out here.

**Well, you were only going to come for two years. It's 2008 now.**

Yeah. Well, it was too good to leave.

**What was so good about Las Vegas?**

Small city. A lot of opportunities. Easy to get around. A lot of fun.

**At the time that you came were you still single? Did you have a family?**

Oh, no. I had four kids.

**You had four kids by this time. And what is your wife's name?**

Mona.

**And her maiden name?**

Robicheaux.

**Could you spell that?**

R-O-B-I-C-H-E-A-U-X.

**And she's also from New Orleans.**



No. She's from Houma. She's Cajun.

**And what kind of a transition was it from your hometown in New Orleans to here in Las Vegas?**

We came to a little town. New Orleans was a big city. At the time we enjoyed it.

**Quite different, though, climatewise.**

Oh, God, yes. Totally different.

**How was that adjustment?**

It was easy for me. She didn't like it at first, but then she got used to it. She wouldn't leave me anyway.

**And how did the children adjust?**

They enjoyed it. I had two more kids born out here.

**So you had a total of six children?**

Six kids, yes.

**How many girls? How many boys?**

Four boys and two girls.

**Wow. What was the experience --**

That's their pictures up there.

**That's going to be great. Young and adulthood.**

Well, I was younger and this is a recent one. The youngest is 50. Joey, who you talked to, is 50, my oldest.

*No. The youngest is not 50. The oldest is 50.*

The youngest is 40.

**For sure you're going to make sure we get that right.**

*I'm listening.*

**So you worked only two years at Nellis or for longer?**

Two years. So it was a two-year assignment.

**And then what did you do?**

Stayed in practice. Got out of the Air Force and stayed in town practicing.

**Stayed in Las Vegas.**



Right. I was deputy hospital commander. I was assistant hospital commander at Nellis.

**But from Nellis what hospital did you go to?**

I went to Southern Nevada, which is now UMC, and Sunrise. And there was a hospital called Women's. Those were the three major hospitals.

**At that time how many OB/GYNs were in town?**

Six.

**Do you remember any of those names?**

Oh, yeah, very well.

**Do you think you could name them for me?**

Bob O'Donnell, Quincy Forteer, Abel Cavert, Bob Dreyer, Ken Turner, Orin Christopherson.

How many is that? That's six.

**And that was Kevin Dreyer?**

Cavert. Able Cavert and his partner was Bob Dreyer. They're all dead except Turner.

**Ken Turner.**

He's still practicing.

**What was the condition of that practice, OB/GYN, in Las Vegas? What did you see taking place then versus now? This could be very interesting because you were in that field. Was prostitution a part of --**

Not in Las Vegas.

**Not in Las Vegas. But did you see any of the clientele?**

Oh, yeah.

**Did they ever come in and see you -- because that is one of my questions here as far as that goes. One of the realities of the Las Vegas area is prostitution. How is that handled by the medical field to keep the community as safe as possible?**

Well, they used to come in to see me. Sometimes they'd ask me instead of paying me could they take it out in trade. My wife was the nurse. It's true.

**And for the record your response was?**

She would say no.

*I responded, "No, he would not."*



**Very interesting. Was there any shame on the part of the clients when they came in?**

No.

**They just said this is what they did?**

Yeah. They said they were pros.

**Any stories? Come on in. But I need you on the record here. I need your voice. Can you give me maybe one or two anecdotal stories?**

Well, I was just going to tell you the story about one of these young prostitutes who called herself a "pro-ette."

*I thought she was a golf pro. I was so naïve.*

And she was a nurse -- or an RN and she was helping the patient get undressed. The patient took off all of her clothes and walked around the room nude. At the end of the exam she said with a little dance, "Would you like to take it out in trade?"

*And she got up from the table. And, of course, the sheet -- they didn't use paper sheets then. They used fabric sheets. And the sheet fell. And there she was nude in front of both of us. She put her hands behind her hand, did a little bump and grind and said, "Would you like to take it out in trade, Doc?" And I said, "No, he would not."*

**Oh, my goodness.**

*That was our first experience with a prostitute.*

That was in '63. I was out of the military.

**Well, for the record the person who has joined us is Mona Rojas, the wife of Dr. Joseph Rojas. I didn't realize you were a nurse. Where did you go to nursing school?**

*At Charity Hospital School of Nursing.*

**Oh. Is that where the two of you met?**

*That's right. In surgery.*

**And what kind of a nurse were you?**

*Registered nurse. I mostly worked pediatrics.*

**Very interesting. So tell me what your experience was like coming to Vegas?**

*Well, initially I really enjoyed the two years we had at Nellis because I thought, you know, we were going back home afterwards. So I enjoyed it. We had a very good social life, et cetera. And*



*then about six months after we were here I realized that I thought the desert was ugly and I couldn't wait to get back home to New Orleans. As we stayed here longer it grew on me and I began to see the beauty of the desert. And we made a lot of friends. And they were still in town. So we ended up staying here.*

**How often did you go home for visits?**

*I was pregnant at the time with the youngest -- no -- the second youngest. And I went to New Orleans with the other four children. They were all, you know, steps. And I flew there because my husband wanted me to go back and see if I really wanted to go back to New Orleans. And so we went back. And then, of course, with the climate change all the kids came down with pneumonia and I knew I was coming back to Las Vegas.*

*She called me up and said come get me.*

*Yes. I wanted him to come and get me because we were really miserable. I mean after we had been here for two years -- it was so dry here and really pleasant. And when we went back there it was so humid.*

*And New Orleans is an old, dirty city.*

*I mean New Orleans is lovely. I don't mean to knock New Orleans. It was just a change in the climate that I didn't really know or want anymore.*

**How in the world did you stay as a practicing nurse with six children?**

*Well, initially we couldn't afford a nurse, so this is why I worked in my husband's office. But as time went by and all the kids started arriving, I just after a while said this is enough and he hired his staff. I had help at the time, not live-in, but I did have help.*

**And where was your home?**

*We lived out in Greenbriar.*

*Sandhill and Mohave Road.*

*Yeah. Off Desert Inn. I mean off Boulder Highway.*

*Boulder Highway and Desert Inn, around there.*

**So you went to work at UMC. When did you open your own practice?**

*That was '63. It was called Southern Nevada Memorial Hospital.*

**So you went to UMC and then you opened Southern Nevada --**



No. Southern Nevada was UMC. It was changed to UMC about seven or eight years ago to make it more glamorous.

**And then you had your own private practice outside of the hospital?**

Yeah. I worked in my own private practice.

**Was it just Dr. Joseph --**

It's my office practice. Yes.

**Describe the medical community when you arrived. Was it open-arm welcoming? Was it sufficient? Did it have some problems?**

A lot of problems.

**Like what?**

A lot of fights among the doctors. A lot of incompetent doctors. A lot of jealousy. A lot of them didn't like me because I was trained. A lot of the GPs and general practitioners and general surgeons were doing OB/GYN. And they were doing a very bad job. We stopped that.

**Because they were doing general practice, but they wanted to concentrate on that and you were specially trained in that field?**

Yeah. They were causing a lot of problems. They lost the babies.

**How did you change that?**

There was no clinic. The indigent people in Las Vegas used to go into Southern Nevada and have their baby without any prenatal care, like 30 a month. So the administrator asked me to start a clinic, which I did in the summer of 1963.

**What was the name of that clinic?**

The Southern Nevada OB/GYN Clinic.

**Is it still operating?**

Well, it's a residency program now. It's part of medical school. I started all that.

**How fascinating. And did you see an improvement immediately?**

Oh, God, yes. We had a sectioned room. We had a post-op recovery room for pregnant women. We had an area where a woman with a baby could go to recover instead of just going right to the room and bleed to death like a couple of them did.

**How awful.**



We stopped a lot of the family practitioners from delivering babies that weren't trained. But most of them quit after a while. Then we started getting some more OB/GYNs in town.

**Do you have any idea today what that number might be?**

Of the OB/GYNs? Seventy-five.

*Now? Probably more than that.*

There may be. I don't know. I'm kind of out of the loop. I trained most of them, but I don't know the number.

**And when did you retire?**

I retired from the medical school two years ago because of my health. I retired from practice taking care of patients in the summer of 1998.

**And you're not still working as a nurse?**

*Oh, no, no, no.*

**When did you retire?**

*Oh, my gosh. Probably '64. So I didn't work long in his office. It was only that one year.*

**But enough to get some good stories.**

*That's right. Exactly.*

**What effects does the desert climate have on our health especially in today's climate?**

I think it's good.

**Is it good?**

Yeah.

**I don't know. I was driving from north to south today and I saw the haze of pollution today, which was awful.**

Yeah. We didn't have that two years ago.

**I said I'm heading right into that. So the dust back then -- and the dust and the desert climate were actually good for people's health?**

It was, yeah. Well, that's what they said. It's dry.

**Would you make that same claim today?**

No.

**Because of the pollution and --**



Yeah.

**What precautions should we take -- these are just some of the questions here. What precautions should we take to protect ourselves from getting the allergies and from the dust that's in our air and the pollutants?**

We have to watch the olive trees and the mulberry bushes. And if you're outside working and there's a lot of dust, wear a mask and wash your hands.

**Wash your hands constantly because of pollens and things?**

Well, you get pollens on your hands. Wash your hands a lot.

**Is the prevalence of asthma higher now than it was way back then?**

I don't know.

**Do you have any opinion on what our drinking water is like today versus what it was like when you first came to town?**

*Personally I don't mind the drinking water. It's water and I drink it and it's fine with me. I know a lot of people rely on mostly bottled water. They like it, et cetera. But as far as I know our water is good here. And I don't have a problem with it. I don't think my husband has a problem with it either.*

No, I don't. It's just very dry right now, though.

**When you were in practice were there any epidemics that might have taken place, epidemics of any kind that you can recall?**

Not in OB/GYN. No.

**How is health care affected by the gaming industry? The smoke inside the casinos? The hours of graveyard versus a regular shift?**

Not for OB/GYN. Not much, no. Maybe for males that work there and women that work there, but not in my specialty.

**Did you ever work behind the scenes at any of the casinos for any of their employees?**

No.

**They just came to you.**

Well, I went down to the hotel a few times to see some celebrities. But that was different.

**Went to where?**



To the hotels to see a few celebrities.

**Any names you can -- oh, you can't do that. Is that doctor-patient confidentiality or is that beyond now? I don't know. When I'm talking to the musicians, I can get names. But I don't think I can here.**

No.

**When you arrived this was in '62 --**

'61.

**-- were waiting rooms integrated or did blacks have to go somewhere else versus whites?**

**What was it like back then? That's a question that just came right out of a different angle.**

*It was all integrated.*

Well, it was kind of integrated. Compared to New Orleans it was very integrated. New Orleans was really segregated.

*Oh, New Orleans, yeah.*

**It was segregated?**

Oh, God, yes. They had drinking fountains for coloreds only and toilets for colored only. But here we never had any of that.

*The hospital was divided in two. One was for African-Americans and other.*

Colored.

*Yeah. They called it colored.*

**Right. Back then they did.**

*I worked on pediatrics. It was C907 and W907. So C was colored. W was white.*

**Now, did white nurses ever take care of black patients?**

*Oh, yeah. Oh, I worked C all the time.*

We took care of most of the patients. We had a charity. They were black. We'd rather take care of them than the whites. Whites were trash.

**And so when you came to Vegas you didn't see those same issues taking place?**

No.

**I'm going to give you a couple of names. One of the first black nurses in Las Vegas was Lubertha Johnson. Do you know her?**



*No, I don't.*

**How about Dr. Charles I. West, who I guess was the first --**

Yes.

*I knew Charles West. Yes.*

**You know Charles West?**

I knew him, yeah.

**Did you know him fairly well?**

I just knew who he was.

**How about by reputation?**

By reputation.

**Can you give me just a little information about him?**

He was supposed to be okay. I don't know anything about him because I didn't work with him.

*He was a family practitioner.*

**So it looks like he came here to Las Vegas in 1954. Do you know how black physicians, black nurses and black patients were accepted by the medical community? Were they all treated equally?**

I think so.

**As fairly equal?**

Yeah.

*I think so.*

Black nurses especially were treated very well.

**Do you have any reason why that would be?**

No. They were just good nurses.

*Well, you know what? Truthfully I think too the West was much more open to being non-segregation. So for us it was a whole new world because we had come from the South where it was segregated. So I felt here that -- I never saw any segregation. I really didn't. And I didn't feel that the people that lived here felt that way.*

Well, there was in the early 60s and the 50s.

*Well, I know when Sammy Davis, Jr. was --*



They couldn't get into hotels.

*Right. That was true. But that was before we got here. That was not when we were here, Joe. So I can't say I saw it.*

**And feel free to comment or not comment on this. But how did your perceptions about African-Americans and your attitudes, did they change dramatically from New Orleans and being raised the way you may have been raised?**

Oh, yeah.

**How did they change?**

We enjoyed the black physicians and the black nurses here. They were much nicer people here. Some of them in New Orleans were trash.

*I feel differently than my husband. All the black people that I came in contact with in New Orleans were really, really nice people. They were lovely people. They were warm, good, not well- educated people, but they were really good people. So I don't feel like my husband does. And then when I came here I didn't find the black population here any different. I really didn't. I just realized that they were far more accepted here than they were in New Orleans.*

*I know my parents were very prejudiced. They really were.*

**That's what I meant.**

Oh, yeah.

**You're a result of your upbringing.**

*Right. Right.*

**It's nothing that you could have controlled. So what I was interested in was your perceptions based on how you were raised and then coming here.**

*Yeah. Well, both of our families were very prejudiced.*

Still are.

*And still are to a great extent. My parents are gone now. Most of my family is gone. But I do remember they were -- maybe because I took care of a lot of black patients and I worked with a lot of black people, I didn't feel the way my parents felt.*

**It might have been interesting to see going back to New Orleans and staying. You might have been able to change attitudes.**



*Right. Right.*

**It might have been very interesting. But your experience probably comes from coming out West and staying here and settling.**

*Right. Exactly.*

**And their experience --**

My brother and sister are still prejudiced.

**And they stayed back there?**

Oh, yeah. They're not physicians.

**Very interesting. Well, thank you for being so candid about it because this is part of the story.**

*Yeah.*

**And it's very interesting.**

*Well, I think now my husband and I both when we're with family from back there, the older members of the family, both of us cringe when we hear racial remarks. We really do because we've grown away from that. We're a new --*

Well, after 45 years I think it would change.

*Absolutely. So we just feel differently than they do.*

**Let's get away from that heavy talk. You were an OB/GYN. Tell me your average patient. Was it a pregnant woman? Was it just somebody -- today when a woman is growing, we go to the doctor frequently. Did you see that with women back then?**

*Yeah.*

**Even prior to getting pregnant and whatnot?**

*Yeah. We saw them once a year. And then when they got pregnant we saw them like every three or four weeks.*

**How long did they stay in the hospital after giving birth?**

*Two days.*

**And we don't generally do that today, though, do we?**

*No. They got in trouble because a lot of -- this executive committee called me in for discharging my patients too soon.*



**And now they try to get them out as soon as possible.**

Well, you know, they're just hanging around the hospital. These were run by old family practitioners who didn't know any better.

**How did you handle getting in trouble?**

I didn't get in trouble. I just said, it's tough, look it up.

**Very interesting. Any stories that you can recall that you'd like to share about your time as a physician in town and any significant events that might have taken place?**

Well, when I was at Nellis I went to one of the County Medical Society meetings. I was the guest. I wasn't in the County Medical Society. A gun was pulled by one of the doctors on another doctor. He pulled a gun.

**Did the gun go off?**

No. He pointed a gun at one of the other doctors.

**Do you remember what year?**

'61 I think.

**That's interesting. That's a good story.**

**How about you, any stories? Any patients that really stick out in your mind?**

*No. I don't think so.*

**What was it like to be a doctor's wife raising children in Las Vegas during all those years?**

*Well, truthfully that was a really good period in our lives, truthfully, because we were involved in all of the -- well, I was involved in all of the auxiliary things, you know. And we'd put on fashion shows, et cetera. So that was a lot of fun. And our kids were part of it. It was great. We had a great community at Nellis Air Force Base. And then after we got out, the medical community was so small that we were all very close. We had a great time together. We had big parties. So it was fun.*

**Were you kind of a big-wig doctor in town?**

Yeah. Big, big-wig.

*Yes, he was.*

**How about your children? I know that one of them, the one named after you, Joseph, is a doctor. How about the other children?**



They're fine.

**Are any of them physicians?**

Oh, no. The second one has his own business in California. He has a weight equipment business. He's the owner of that. My third son is in real estate, broker. My daughter Lisa works for my son. My daughter Carol lives in Phoenix and she's in hotel administration. And John's an architect in San Francisco.

**So just one out of six went into the medical field.**

Yeah.

**Did he work closely with you?**

Not really.

**What medicine does he practice?**

OB/GYN.

*He went to Tulane for his medical school. And he did his residency at Irvine. So he really didn't work with my husband until he came back here to open his practice.*

He's been in practice about, what, 18 years now?

**Is he a good doctor?**

Oh, very good. Yeah.

*Very good.*

He's got a wife that's an OB/GYN. And he has an assistant, one young lady I trained, and she's very good too. And he just hired somebody else.

**How many female doctors were in practice when you first came here and did you see it change over the course --**

*Good question. Yeah. Because it has changed.*

A lot.

**Well, a lot now. But when you first came, how many --**

Very, very few.

*I'm trying to think of one OB -- who was it?*

**I'm meeting a Dr. Angela Clark.**

*Yeah. I know Angela.*



Angela's been around awhile.

**I'm going to be meeting her for this project. But in OB/GYN were there any females?**

No. Not until about the late 1960s.

**I guess that brings me to an interesting question, which is completely off of this. How did your female patients react to being seen in that intimate way by a male? And how did that change over time?**

I did not have any problem.

**Because I know as I became of age it's like female only. I've had a couple of male, but I much prefer a female doctor. But I do also know being a historian that females felt more confident with a male doctor because of authority.**

I had no problem.

**Did anybody ever question a diagnosis, a female? Did she ever question a diagnosis or was your word always it?**

I worked with my patients pretty closely. Like they participated. Very, very, very rarely did anybody ever not follow my advice.

**When you first came to practice here, did you approach your practice the same way 30 years later --**

I think so.

**-- where you took the time with the patients and whatnot?**

Yep.

**Do you feel that doctors don't do that today?**

I agree they don't.

**It's like a cattle call or something.**

It's called time management. And you can do it because I used to sit down with my patients and still see a lot of patients.

*Well, he used to see them in his office too. He'd examine them. But then they would go into his office and he would sit down and talk to them.*

Every one.

**I thought that was a myth.**



*No, no, no.*

**I didn't think doctors ever did that except on TV.**

Well, I did it until 1998.

**Oh, that's terrific.**

I did it all my life.

*Yes, he did. All of his life.*

You can do it.

**What things have you written that we might be able to look up?**

Oh, God. I gave a lot of talks, but I haven't written much. "Transition to a Residency Program" in the 60s.

*Well, he started the residency program. I don't know if you're --*

**Oh, I thought it was just the clinic.**

*No, no, no. He started the first OB/GYN residency in the state.*

I started the first residency program in anything in the state.

**What year was that?**

1966. There was no medical school.

*There are many, many OB/GYN men and women in this town that are students of his and participated in his program. And they're all good doctors, really good doctors. So he has a lot to be proud of.*

Yeah, I guess so.

**I think I recall now Joseph telling me that you had started that first.**

**So when you started the program you were also a teacher?**

Yeah.

**Did you end up teaching your son in that same residency program?**

No. He didn't take a residency with me.

*No. He went to Tulane.*

**During the years that you were in practice, how many people did you see leave Nevada to go get care, say, in California or Utah? Was that really a high number?**

It was pretty high.



**Have we changed that at all?**

I'm not too sure. I think the upper crust still go to places like Salt Lake and UCLA because it's the thing to do.

**Not because it's necessary; it's the thing to do.**

No. There are plenty of people here to do what they do over there.

**Can you give me some of the names of some of the colleagues that you know that you have high esteem for from the past?**

In OB/GYN?

**In any medical area. From the past as well as the present.**

Still living? Dan McBride, surgeon. Terry Badis, surgeon. A lot of them were good that are dead.

**Did you feel while you were here that -- you said you're a very good doctor. Did you admire anybody in your younger years that was a physician here?**

Did I admire anybody?

**Yeah. That you can name.**

*Oh, I think you did with Dr. O'Donnell.*

O'Donnell, yeah.

*I think you admired him.*

**What was his first name?**

*Bob O'Donnell.*

Yeah. He died about 20 years ago.

*I mean he admired him enough that he sent me there for my pregnancy.*

**Oh, you didn't deliver your own children?**

*Oh, no.*

**Were you not allowed to do that?**

You can do it, but I never did it.

*Ethically we shouldn't. It's not --*

She couldn't afford me.

**Were you in the room at all or you didn't do things like that back then?**



What?

**You weren't in the room holding her hand --**

No.

**-- helping her do the breathing?**

*No. I was biting in a face cloth.*

**Did you stay awake for all your deliveries?**

*No. No. I did get -- I forget what they used.*

Trilean (phonetic).

*They give you a whiff of it, you know, at the actual -- when it got really painful.*

She did everything so fast she barely made it to the delivery rooms.

**Oh, lucky you.**

*Yeah. I had no problems.*

Except the last one.

*Yeah. John was the only one that took a little longer. But all the other kids were really very easy childbirths.*

**Other than the lady of the night who offered a trade, how did patients pay for their service before insurance, before credit?**

Cash. Silver dollars.

**What if somebody did not have the money?**

I still took care of them.

**And did you just eat the cost or did they somehow eventually pay you back?**

Sometimes they took their insurance money and kept it. But most of the time they paid me back.

**Very interesting. What kinds of fees were charged by doctors way back in the day?**

A delivery was \$225. A hysterectomy was \$400.

**That's interesting that you would remember that.**

In '63.

*I remember that very well.*

**What was one of your most complex cases? Can you recall?**

I had a woman with a double uterus who was pregnant with a pregnancy on each side. She had



one baby on one side and one on the other side. So I sectioned one and took one out and got the other one. That wasn't complex to me. It was interesting.

**Well, did she go to full term with both?**

Well, 37 weeks. You never really go to full term with twins. You usually go two or three weeks early.

**Any others you can think of?**

*Didn't you have a patient once that had to go up to Salt Lake to the hyperbaric? She had --*  
Gas gangrene.

*Yeah, gas gangrene.*

It's like tetanus. She got infected after surgery and I had to cut incisions on her to let the infection out up and down her leg. She looked like she was in a sword fight.

*I think you sent her up to Utah. I think they had a hyperbaric -- isn't it called --*

**A chamber.**

*Yeah. Right, right. Which she was placed in. I mean she survived.*

**And she owes her life to you I see.**

I never had any maternal deaths. I actually did, what, 50 deliveries a month. Never had a death. I was lucky.

**As you look back on your career as a doctor are you very happy with the choices that you made and the career path that you went into?**

Oh, yeah. I stopped obstetrics in the mid-seventies and did nothing but gynecology and gynecological surgery. And I was very happy with that. So I haven't delivered a baby in 30 years.

**Were midwives used extensively here in Las Vegas?**

Huh-uh.

**Did you ever use a midwife?**

I'm the one that started it at UMC.

**Oh, you started it?**

Uh-huh. Five years ago.

**And how successful do you think that is?**

Very successful. These are registered midwives. There are so many people that call themselves



midwives that deliver at home with no prenatal care, you know, and they get in trouble a lot.

*Like dulas.*

I don't know if they're dulas.

**That's the lady's name?**

*No, no, no.*

No, no. A dula is somebody who assists in delivery.

**And what is your feeling about that?**

Terrible.

**Because of?**

Because if they get in trouble, they don't realize it. The midwives do it at the hospital. And if they're in trouble, there are residents there and staff men. We have a doctor in house at UMC now around the clock, a full OB/GYN. Plus we're resident doctors.

**What do you feel is the reason why women choose a midwife over a regular doctor?**

Cheaper.

*But some of the women that I've heard of also think it's a spiritual kind of thing. It's more in keeping with how pregnancies used to be, down to Earth, Mother Earth, that kind of thing.*

Well, I don't know because I never had the experience with the outside midwives. The midwives that I brought in from the outside like five years ago help cover the deliveries for the residents.

*But a lot of the women that I've heard that have had -- not registered midwives, but dulas, that kind of thing at home where the whole family is gathered around and they're all part of the delivery process. I think this is more a spiritual thing. It's getting back to basics. Some people like that.*

**And as long as they are following good, solid medical common sense, that's an okay thing in your book?**

Well, if they have backup. If you deliver a baby at home, that's fine. But if there's trouble or if the baby's at breach and they don't realize it, they shouldn't do that at home without help.

**True.**

You shouldn't do it as a physician without help.

**True. From what you've heard, how has early medical care in Las Vegas been different**



**from other parts of the country?**

Early days of medicine? Pretty bad.

**It was bad?**

I think it was.

*Yeah. I agree.*

**And do you feel over the last 40 years it's made some improvements?**

Oh, it's great.

*Oh, yeah.*

**How would you rate Las Vegas to the rest of the country now?**

Excellent. We've got everything.

**How many grandchildren do you guys have?**

*Eight.*

**Ranging in age from?**

*The oldest is 21. Joey's 21. And our youngest is Nicholas, who is 14.*

**Any of them interested in being a doctor?**

I don't think so.

**Or a nurse?**

*I don't think so. Truthfully I mean you know they're all hoping to get into college --*

Medicine's very hard. It's a hard life.

**In what way?**

Your hours. People nowadays get jobs and then they go home. In medicine you're on-call all the time. I was on-call all the time.

*Especially OB/GYN I think. If you're a solo practitioner you're on-call all the time and you're up all night.*

Frequently.

*And in the office all day.*

And your phone would ring at any moment.

*Oh, yeah.*

**How was that?**



*It was not so much the lack of sleep. But if we went out I mean I could count on being by myself at the table for the next two or three hours or however long it took him to deliver the baby. I mean there are many, many times we'd go out to a birthday or an anniversary and I would be there -- I got to know a lot of waiters and waitresses just sitting there waiting forever.*

Sometimes I'd take the maître d' with me because it was his wife.

**And that was the in day before pagers and cell phones.**

I had pagers.

*Well, no. The first thing you ever had was that old phone, that big old phone.*

**And they could reach him anywhere?**

*Well, not if you got too far away from the core. But most of the time you let your service know where you would be. This is Dr. Rojas. I'm going to the Sahara Hotel for dinner. And they would reach him there.*

**Very interesting.**

I was at The Mint. You know, The Mint, remember The Mint?

**Yes.**

I was at the top of The Mint. Mona and I and my nurse anesthetist and his wife were having dinner. And I got a call that a woman had just come into Women's Hospital and she started to push a lot. That means she's going to deliver real fast. So I took Skip, my anesthetist, and I got in the car and I'm driving very fast down Fremont. And I got stopped by a motorcycle cop. And he said pull over. I said I can't. He said pull over. And I told him why I was -- he said, oh, my God, it's my wife. So I got a police escort to the hospital.

**Oh, my goodness. What a great story.**

*It was really a small town.*

**You were not here during the Hoover Dam era, but did you know any doctors that had worked on people that worked on the Hoover Dam?**

No.

*I can't remember. No. And there would have probably been more in Boulder City.*

**Well, Dr. Silver said that he was the first OB/GYN in Boulder City.**

Probably, yeah.



*He might have. Sure. Sure.*

**I had one other question, too. What is your feeling about scheduled births now? It came up when you were talking about how you're having dinner and somebody's pushing.**

It's all right.

**Scheduled births are so prevalent now. Do you agree with that practice?**

Yes and no. If the patient is ready and she's got a very soft cervix and the baby is down in the pelvis, you could help her along a day earlier.

**But to be scheduled for convenience sake...**

Well, I'm not too crazy about that.

*No. You never did that.*

No. I never did that.

**I heard somebody recently just say her sister's going in because they're tired of waiting or it's a good day.**

*Right, right. I've heard that too.*

**I don't get that.**

**All right. I don't want to take up too much more of your time, but I don't want to have missed anything. So tell me something that I might not have asked or tell me a story or tell me I'm done because --**

*Well, there are some accolades that you've received.*

**Yes. I would like to hear those.**

Such as?

*Feikes.*

Oh, yeah. I was Nevada State Physician of the Year in 1980. And I was Clark County Physician of the Year in 2001. So I got those two awards.

*And he's now an emeritus professor of OB/GYN at University of Nevada.*

And I started the first residency program in the state. And also the first OB/GYN program in 1980.

*I'm trying to think of anything else.*

**How many newspaper articles or magazine articles have been written about you?**



A number.

*Yeah. A number of them.*

**Would that be possible to get some for the archives, maybe copies of them?**

*I can look and see if I've got anything. Certainly there must be something in your -- let me go take a look. I'm not sure.*

**And even though you're retired, do you still keep up with the medical field in any way?**

No.

**You kind of said I'm done. You don't even watch television shows that are all about medicine?**

No. God, no.

**Dr. Rojas, thank you so much for your time.**

Thank you.