

AN INTERVIEW WITH FERNANDO ROMERO

An Oral History Conducted by Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

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PREFACE



When Fernando Romero (b 1946) started school as a Spanish-only speaker in the barrios of El Paso, Texas. He quickly picked up English, excelled in classes, and proudly claims his Chicano identity. Education came with good and bad teachers, the bad believing they were entitled to pick on the brown-skinned children. These were early lessons for Fernando, who describes his harsher lessons would come when he enrolled at Nevada Southern (known as UNLV today.)

Fernando was the keen-eyed youngest of five Romero children. He witnessed the accomplishments of his family members and reaped benefit of their encouragement. Despite working two jobs, his father also found time to perform as a musician in the El Paso Symphony. One of his older brothers graduate high school early and was hired as a professional musician with big named bands in Las Vegas. Music also motivated Fernando, but not in quite the same way. For him it was the key to higher education and scholarships.

When he moved to Las Vegas in 1967, he found himself amidst a tiny enrollment of Latinos on campus, of those, most of those were of Cuban ancestry, not Mexican like him. He founded the Student Organization of Latinos (SOL). Fernando changed his major from music to a political science and practice his success by working with a host of community leaders, from former Nevada governors to US Senators, from education to gaming industry to civic leadership. He often became the first Latino to hold a position of leadership. He is a lifetime member and President of the Hispanics In Politics.

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October 2, 2018
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez

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—to change their names in order to be accepted into the University of Texas. Just to cite a major example of somebody like that, was Vikki Carr's family, Vikki Carr, the singer. I don't know if you're familiar.

BARBARA: Sure.

But Vikki Carr was always from El Paso, Texas, and her family changed [their last name]. I believe her name was Coranza, but they had to change the name in order to be accepted. Discrimination was rampant.

Horacio [Lopez] in those years—I met Horacio about forty-seven years ago, forty-nine years ago. We used to call him Horace because that was his name. He's so light-skinned and green-eyed or blue-eyed, so he could pass (for white). Some of us couldn't. Others would say that they were Italian and that kind of stuff. It was a dark part of the history of Chicanos, particularly in Texas and California.

How was that here? Did you have to change your name?

I could have if I wanted to. I'm the youngest of five, five survivors anyway; there were three who died before I was born. Anyway, my brother changed his name to Mraz and tried to pass for Italian or Romanian. He did it more out of fun than anything else, but we don't forget little things like that. No, it didn't affect me that much. I've been a staunch Chicano from the days I can remember. I was proud of it.

That's great. We kind of jumped in.

I'm sorry.

LAURENTS: No, it's perfect.

BARBARA: That's what will happen...We have the photos up here (pointing to board of

photos) and it does prompt memories and stories and that's what we're about. We're the Oral History Research Center, and over the last fifteen years or so, we've worked on different projects of documenting the history of the Las Vegas community through the stories of people like yourself. So we welcome you here. This is great.

Thank you. Let me give you your card.

LAURENTS: I'm going to go ahead, and we'll officially start.... This is Laurents Banuelos-Benitez. Today's date is October second, 2018. We are inside the Oral History Research Center in the Lied Library. I'm joined by Barbara Tabach. Today we're interviewing Fernando Romero.

Fernando, can I have you spell your name, please?

I am Fernando Romero. Fernando is F, as in Frank, E-R-N-A-N-D-O; R-O-M-E-R-O.

Thank you.

Let's start at the beginning: where were you born?

El Paso, Texas, El Segundo Barrio. Segundo Barrio—second, word in English—was the toughest ward probably in those years in the entire Southwest, a lot of gang members. It was one of those barrios where you would walk down the street and you had street gangs named after almost every street: Sevens, Rocking Eights; that kind of thing. If you lived in the barrio, you go straight to your home; you don't mess with other people in other segments of the barrio. We got along well as long as we knew our boundaries. Because it was the barrio, I saw a lot of things happening, a lot of machismo, a lot of domestic violence, a lot of gang activity. There were drugs; I saw that.

My father worked two jobs and he was a musician to boot, so we did okay. We were the first on the block to have a TV set. We were the first on the block to have a car. The first on the

block to have a natural electric refrigerator. But even then I lived in the days when the ice truck would come and take out the block of ice and put it in your house and in your icebox. Then it was an icebox. I remember all those things. I love when I was born because I went from using an actual outhouse to using an actual bathroom inside a house, which was a rarity in those days.

Anyway, it was a nice childhood. We lived in the barrio, and then I was going on six years old when we moved to another what I call rural barrio. Going back to the original barrio, my mother had us all enrolled in school with the nuns, in a nursery. I was three years old when I started with the nuns. I was six years old when I moved to the other barrio. I didn't know a lick of English. The nuns taught us all in Spanish and everything else, but they actually taught us. I knew math and all that other stuff at an obviously tender age. We moved to a rural area. At this time, it was rural; it's not anymore. But anyway, Ramona Grade School is where I first started. I started the first grade and should have started the second grade.

How far back do you want me to go?

BARBARA: This is great. It lays a foundation for where you came from.

Not only that—the foundation as to why I do what I do basically.

Again, I started the first grade because of my lack of English. My cousin, who was the same age as I—in fact, I was a year older. I speak in the past tense because she's deceased. When they found out that I knew all my colors and I could actually color inside the lines and everything else and knew my alphabet, although I didn't know what the letters stood for, but nonetheless, they moved me to the second grade. They didn't have ESL in those days, obviously, so they sat me right next to my cousin. In three months, I was doing okay. I didn't know what *tangerine* was and I didn't know certain words that the teacher would use, but, nonetheless, I started grabbing on.

I loved school. I went twelve years to school without ever missing a day. I went ill. School was very happy for me, first, second, third grade and fourth grade, fifth grade. Then came sixth grade when I started witnessing what was in my eyes a rude awakening as far as knowing discrimination when I noticed at the school half of us are Chicanos and a half of us are white and there are no Chicano teachers at all, period.

We had three teachers in particular, three male teachers—Mr. Davis, Mr. Rice and Mr. Womack—that would beat us up just for the sake of beating us. We'd be sitting down and Mr. Womack, for example, would walk around with a ruler. He taught math. He would hit us on the back just for the sake of it. Of course, we would tell our mom and Mom would say, "Well, you must have been doing something wrong." No, we weren't, just sitting there. I know it sounds incredulous. It is what it is.

In the seventh grade, Mr. Davis bought a brand-new Ford Galaxy, a beautiful car. He was so mean that one of the kids in the room, Jose Gomez, went and tore off the antennae of the car. Jose made the mistake of leaving the antennae on the ground, and I say that because Mr. Davis brought the antennae in the room and he would beat us with the antennae and say, "Fernando, did you break this?" And he would hit me with the antennae, and then Pepito and all the other guys in the room, Mexicans, the Chicanos. The white guys were left alone.

BARBARA: So, he targeted...

Just the brown people. We were basically fifty-fifty back then in the classrooms.

This would be about what year?

Well, I was in the seventh grade. I would have no idea of what year. I graduated from high school in '65, so date yourself back. That was basically it. Because it's Texas, we by law had to study Texas history. Mr. Rice, the history teacher, would end his lectures, the majority of them,

by saying, "And the Texans wiped themselves with the Mexican flag." That was basically the ending of all his lectures.

In those years—and I wish I had kept a copy of it—they had history books for Texas and they were like comic books that were approximately four inches by, let's say, eight inches. It was like cartoons teaching you history. But they would paint in this book the Mexicans with a mustache and no front teeth and that kind of thing. They would have the Texans beating on the Mexicans. It was very horrific.

Mr. Womack, if we did something wrong in the classroom, he would put us up in the front of the classroom and he would put us on our knees and then make us put our arms behind our neck and then just sit there like this for the whole period.

There were good teachers. Mrs. Smith—I'll love forever. At the time we thought she was real old. She was probably forty-five or fifty, but, hey, that's Old Mrs. Smith. My understanding is that she was a, quote-unquote, old maid, but excellent, excellent, excellent teacher. In fact, whatever grammar I know, whatever spelling I know, whatever I may know as far as English is concerned, I give her all the credit because she was very, very good. She was strict, not mean strict. She was just the kind that would stare you down and look at you if you were doing something wrong, and that was worse than Mr. Davis' beating us with the aerial antennae. You really felt that stare. But she was an equal opportunity starrer; everybody got Mrs. Smith's stare. I loved her. I really did. I still to this day give her a lot of credit for what little I know as far as grammar is concerned and that.

This was a public school?

It was public school, yes. No, there weren't too many Mexicans going to private schools.

I thought maybe a parochial Catholic school.

No, I'm sorry, you're right. You're absolutely right. No, it was public because there were a couple of schools in El Paso, one of them the Loretta Academy that was strictly for young ladies. That was a very good school.

I was, by the way, the captain of the patrol boys and that, so it wasn't all that bad. Like I said, there were some good teachers that did look at us as students and not as Mexicans or Chicanos or "your people killed my great-grandfather twenty years ago."

That's what I learned also from Mr. Davis that the Texas Rangers were actually created to kill Mexicans, and he would say it with a smile. I remember one time we had this student who asked him something about Amarillo (Spanish pronunciation emphasized), Texas, and he got very upset. He said, "It's Amarillo (Angelized pronunciation). And if you ever go to Amarillo, Texas and you say Amarillo (with a Spanish pronunciation), Texas, they'll hang you from the nearest street.

We found that out to be true later on, by the way. But that was the kind of person that Davis and Rice and Womack were. It's funny how I don't remember the good teachers' names other than Mrs. Smith.

I was captain of the patrol boys in the seventh and eighth grade. I was on the student council the third, fourth, fifth and sixth—well, every year, in fact. I have what is known today as the gift of gab, and I guess some of the teachers appreciated that.

Maybe I should add a little color in there. I was voted in; I ran for the student body president in the seventh grade for the eighth grade. I remember very vividly at the end of the day walking down the hallway and Mr. Davis was standing in the threshold of his class. And he said, "Fernando, come over here." So I came over and he closed the door and sat me down next to him. He said, "I wanted you to know that we've counted all the ballots and you won the student

body president." Oh my God, I was elated. "Oh, Mr. Davis, thank you." He said, "No, no, you're not going to be student body president. I'm going to give it to John Green."

John Green was everybody's hero, the kid you see in the movies—the quarterback, this, that and the other. He was a nice guy, by the way, so I don't fault John for anything. Mr. Davis just said...

I said, "Well, why? Why are you doing this? If I won, why are you giving it to John?" He said, "Because, number one, you're a Mexican; and, number two, you hang around with Mexicans." I said, "Mr. Davis, I am Mexican, so are my relatives, my friends...I live in the barrio." Well, we didn't call it the barrio then. "I live in the neighborhood. Of course, I have to hang around with people the same as me." He said, "Well, that's a problem for me, so you're not going to be." He said, "You can complain if you want, but I've got the ballots. Meaning, I can destroy. So grin and bear it." Again, I go into all that because of the consciousness that I was being drawn to.

I remember there were a lot of very rich kids in the school. We had the barrio and then right across the street almost there was a neighborhood that started within the fork of the road and they were all these rich people's homes, beautiful homes. Many of them had swimming pools, but they did have a community pool there in this area, to which, by the way, none of us were invited. Even if a friend of ours would ask us to go, they wouldn't let us in.

All the kids were nice. I don't remember receiving any kind of negative reactions or actions from any of the students. The teachers were the ones that were doing it, primarily the ones I just mentioned. The problem is that they did it in the sixth, seventh, eighth grades because in those years there was no kindergarten, but there was first through the eighth.

Then I went on to one of the largest high schools in the state of Texas at the time—I don't

know how it is now—Ysleta High School. There again, I got along fairly well with everybody. Normally it was just the teachers that were the ones that would exude this hatred. But, in general, everything was okay. I was the president of the band for a number of years. I was first chair all-city band all four years of my high school career, which was a big honor, because El Paso, although it isn't a gigantic city and wasn't then, but it was certainly recognizably large city. It was an honor to be in the all-city band because you're playing with all these people from all the various high schools in El Paso.

Again, another slap in the face as far as discrimination is concerned...Every year the school gave out a Who's Who. Everybody thought, including myself, that Fernando was going to get the Who's Who Award. By the way, it was given to seniors in high school. Then when they named them, because we used to have assemblies that I'm sure they have now, here I am waiting for Mr. Faroni to say *Fernando Romero*, and he gives it to Jill. I can't remember Jill's last name offhand. She was a majorette. Majorette in those years were part of the band because there was no place to characterize them. After the football season, they had them playing...One of them played the flute, one of them played the saxophone, one of them played the drums, et cetera. Jill played the timpani. In fact, even in my yearbook, which I have by the way, Jill writes in there, "Fernando, this award is yours." I didn't say anything, of course. I thanked her for having written that in there. But, no, Jill, it's yours. Anyway, you just felt...

I kept coming here to Vegas almost every summer. My older brother was a musician. My brother left home around the age of sixteen. He was an incredibly excellent musician. One day a band went into town and he auditioned with them and they liked him and they took him. My brother, when he was eight years old, the local high school would go get him. He was a first chair clarinetist in the high school band and he was eight years old. That was an example of how

good he was. He wound up in Las Vegas. He played with the Dorsey Brothers, Glenn Miller orchestra, and all those orchestras of the time and wound up here. I would come visit him. He had been here since '57, my brother had. I would come here and I loved it. It was a small oasis, literally, just a very small town. All you had was a few casinos down the Strip and just apartments and little homes around and basically that was it.

I came here one time in '59 to try to stay with my brother, but my father got called back for a job in the warehouse. In those years if you were Chicano and you were called for a government, it didn't matter what the government job was, it was a big honor. We were going to move here. We went back. I felt badly. I wanted to stay with my brother, but obviously that was not the case. Again, that was in '59.

I did attend for a short stint what is now John C. Fremont. It was an elementary school in those years. It was a brand-new school.

BARBARA: You attended school there?

Yes. It was in the fourth grade, but it was a very short stint. It was like maybe three months, if that much. I remember—now, listen to this—they would bring me around classroom to classroom. "Fernando, would you count to five in Spanish?" *Uno, dos, tres, cuatro*. It was funny. Particularly now, it is like, can you count in English? Yes, it was one of those things that were very ironic.

Because there weren't any other Spanish-speaking—

There were no Chicanos here, no Latinos. The few Latinos that worked here were in the back of the house, as they still are, but it was not as predominate. I moved here in 1967.

I went to University of Texas, El Paso, but at that time—I graduated in '65—it was called Texas Western College of Minds. Whatever governmental things that they had going, they

changed the name to the University of Texas, El Paso. I remember UTEP, UTEP, UTEP. I was in the band also. It was the year that UTEP won the NCAA Championship. I remember when the band director, Mr. Hilliard, was getting people together, there was a bassoon player. I can't remember her name. I was second chair saxophonist, alto player, because there was another Chicano that was in front of me, Hector Sanchez. Anyway, he started picking people to take as a pep band to Kentucky to play—I think it was Kentucky—to play in the NCAA.

Is this basketball, NCAA basketball tournament?

Yes, basketball.

I love college basketball and especially from that era.

When were you born?

We're not too far apart.

Mr. Hilliard chose basically nothing but white students to take to the tournament. I was not one of them. He took a bassoon player who didn't know what a saxophone was. Obviously you don't see too many bassoons in a marching band or in a pep band, so he took her. "Oh, I need to take a certain number of females." Whatever excuse he came up with. I was up to here with excuses.

Going back to my older brother, he graduated at the age of fifteen from high school. He was a great musician. That was at El Paso High School where he went. When they passed out their awards, he didn't get it. When they passed out scholarships, he didn't get scholarships. They all went to white kids.

Déjà vu all over again, as Yogi Berra used to say. I saw that as well, having lost out on Who's Who and now I'm losing out on going to the NCAA tournament, which obviously turned out to be the part of life that everybody wanted as part of their background.

Anyway, I moved here. I came right to my brother's. I was a music major, not because I

wanted to, but because I had to. We didn't have a lot of money. I had enlisted in the Air Force upon graduation and the Air Force had accepted me. I took the test and everything else. I was going to go into the Air Force. Then my brother said, "No, you're not going. I'll pay your first year." That, plus a scholarship that I had for music, brought me here to Nevada Southern University at the time.

Maybe you guys can answer this for me sometime this year. I am really almost certain that if I wasn't the first, I was among the first ten Chicanos, not Latinos, Chicanos that came to UNLV. Again, I came to Nevada Southern. You can imagine that there were maybe five buildings, if that many, here. It was called Nevada Southern and after a little while they changed the name to UNLV. People kept saying, "Unlove, unlove." No, it's not love. Obviously, it's UNLV.

It was very noticeable, very obvious that there were no Latinos at all. The three Latinos that I met at the time were Cuban. I came here in '67.

That was a time when Cuba had gone through their revolution and they were kicking them out of Cuba. I say them, I mean the Cubans who were aristocrats, in essence, the learned Cuban, the educated Cuban, the Cuban that was in politics, they came here. They came here with the feeling of "you are not a human being if you don't go to a university." They started going to the university. Maria Castillo Couch, she just retired from the city. Benny Surmosa. Amarillo Fernandez who is a principal, I believe, now retired, at Basic High School. They were here, so I met them, but I didn't meet Chicanos. That's why I say I'm either the first or among the first ten, if anything, of the Chicanos.

I enrolled, of course, and I took Spanish 101. Even though I spoke street Spanish, which is a heck of a lot different from a university or culturally learned Spanish, I didn't know Spanish,

in essence. I could speak it and I could understand it. I couldn't write it or anything else, a little bit. I enrolled in Spanish 101—no, they switched me to 401. I said, "Why?" They put me in there to read Cervantes and even William Shakespeare in Spanish. Damn, it was one of those things. Cheech Marin is one of the guys I love. Even know he speaks hardly any Spanish, he came up with this thing in a song that he sang. He said, "Mexican Americans enrolling in high school take Spanish and flunk out or get Ds in Spanish." It's a song and I identify with that. It was a very tough class for me.

Anyway, I remember walking into the classroom and there was Dr. Zermanski, I think it was. I remember him dancing. He said, "Fernando Romero, Fernando Romero." He was dancing literally when I first walked in the classroom. He said, "Oh, here is a guy named Bill John and here is a guy named Fernando Romero. This is like poetry." He kept dancing around and I felt embarrassed. A little prideful, I might add, but, nonetheless, embarrassed. But anyway, I was a first year saxophonists for the dance band that we had here at UNLV, again, because I was a music major.

By the way, I was married. I married at the age of nineteen. I remember when my father came to me and he said, "You're not old enough." I said, "I am old enough." "You're not mature enough." "I am mature enough." Nineteen. I have a twenty-year-old right now. I might as well tell you I've been married four times. But nonetheless, my father was right. My father didn't say much.

My father was supposed to drop out of school in the third grade because of the Great Depression had hit and everything else and he was supposed to go out and work. I don't know if you guys ever saw this Facebook thing where a black gentleman is thinking about his dad and basically said the same thing, my dad dropped out in the third grade, et cetera. My father is a

man I admire the most because, again, he dropped out in the third grade. By the way, our family has lived there for a long, long time in the USA, Chicago. When my mother first arrived, arrived in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. She was only thirteen years old at the time. Anyway, how everybody wound up in El Paso, I'll never know. But nonetheless, my father learned how to read and write both languages. I have never seen to this day more beautiful penmanship than my father's. Trying to imitate his signature, which I did to sign some of my report cards in school...It was just a beautiful to look at. It was a work of art. Anyway, here's a man only with a third-grade education who taught himself how to be a musician. He became the first chair violinist in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. It's a long story and I won't go into it, but they stole his violin and it was like stealing a part of his family. He never went back to the violin—well, he did, but not in that same vein. He took up the bass and then became the first chair bassist for the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. I just admire him. He didn't talk much.

He was a voter. In those years—Laurents, you may not know this; in fact, maybe not you also—there was what is known as a poll tax and a literacy test, and that was to keep blacks and Latinos away from the polls. Well, my father, as I said, taught himself how to read and write, so he could pass the literacy test. It was three dollars back in those years. Three dollars is equivalent to maybe thirty bucks now, I would say. You had to literally pay a tax in order to go vote, and so my father always did that. I was always very proud of him. I didn't know why he did it, but I did realize he did it.

It was funny because I remember, going back to grade school, voting days they would have this gigantic—three machines would cover this wall right here, just gigantic voting machines. They had a little curtain. They had a couple of levers; one was Democrat and the other was Republican. Obviously at the time—I guess maybe to this day this is still the same way—but

you would go with a lever and in one minute you had voted because you selected nothing but Democrats. Of course, you could do one at a time, but that would literally take four minutes. But nonetheless, my father voted, but never said anything, going back to, "Fernando, you're too young; Fernando, you're too immature." He was right on both accounts.

Anyway, I came here. I might add that there was discrimination I had never seen even in Texas. By Texas standards, the discrimination I faced at NSU, UNLV was harsh. It was basically brutal. In those years, and I don't know how it is now, but you had to take four semesters of PE, and so I made the mistake of taking up basketball my first year. The white guys would elbow me, hit me as hard as they could, knocking me to the ground every single time. Mind you, this is a class. Of course, any time I would try to defend myself, all these guys would gather around the actual villain, if you will. I just kind of literally grinned and bear it. The next semester I took up volleyball and volleyball was no different. It's a rough sport or it can be. I was accidentally hit so many times that my face was always puffed up like a muffin. The last three years I said, "No, I'm going to take up bowling the third year and then golf the fourth year." That was the mistake of my life.

I've never had, thank God, an addiction because, again, going back to the drugs that I saw when I was four or five years old, I saw what drugs can do to you, so I promised myself back then I would never take drugs, and I never have. To this very, very day, right now if you show me cocaine that would be the very first time that I would physically see the cocaine. I've never seen it.

I took up golf and it took me. In those years, Laurents, the Sands, the Aladdin, the Dunes, right in front of the hotel they had golf courses. You're driving down the Strip and you see all these golf courses. I would get off and pay a few bucks and play a round of golf. I was working

at the post office at the time, a full-time employee and full-time student. Golf just engulfed me, if you will, pardon the pun. Anyway, I wouldn't go to work. I used up all my sick leave, all my annual leave and every other leave that you can think of, and I stopped going to school. I missed a whole year of school. When you're looking up my records to see if I'm the first Chicano, don't look up my grades, please.

BARBARA: What was your handicap?

To be honest with you I really don't remember. My handicap was golf; that's all I can tell you. No, but it was horrible. It was just horrible. My brother had given me a bag of golf clubs. I won't say I threw them away, because I didn't, but I gave them away. I didn't sell them. I did nothing. I just got rid of them. It was like cold turkey. I got rid of golf and that was approximately I'll just say forty-five years ago or more. In those forty-five years I've played golf once and that was because the guy was a cousin of a friend of mine and the cousin was a big, big mucky-muck at Coca-Cola in Atlanta. He invited, so I went over there and just hit a ball. It wound up going into the mesquites a number of times, but, nonetheless, I was out there. But in those forty-five years I've only played golf once and that was that year, which was about fifteen years ago I might add.

Going back to the brutal treatment that I got from my white friends, my black student brothers basically protected me. There were more blacks than Latinos. I was in the student union. They had hardly any classrooms, but they did have a student union, I might add, here at UNLV. I would hang around there as 90 percent of the students would. It's funny because it was packed and I would be sitting at a table and there would be nobody at my table, nobody. It's like, hey, do I have skin cancer, leprosy or something? The blacks started inviting me over to sit with them.

We fought to get a black student union going, a black studies program, and we did get one finally, eventually a black studies program going. Art Chapman was the first professor, a

very smart black man, incredibly smart. Anyway, it's funny because—I'll enter parenthesis as they say in Spanish, between parenthesis—he's the first guy I ever heard talk about the ozone, back then. I'm talking about '68, '69. The first guy. Even after that I didn't hear ozone until not too long ago when President Bush tried to spell the word or tried to pronounce it. Anyway, Art, we helped him.

Knowing there was a lack of Latino students, I formed—we called it La Raza at the time and then changed it to La Raza Unidos because the Cubans started coming and joining. Then we changed it to Student Organization of Latinos. It was here for a number of years up until the advent of Latino sororities and fraternities because that was the Latino sorority and fraternity. You had Jose Luis Melendrez, although that was much later as they're much younger than I am. When I started it was—they're basically all retired—Emilio Fernandez, Gina White, Vicenta Montoya, a number of people. Some of them have gone back to where they were from. We started recruiting Latino students. We started going into the high schools to talk to kids. It's funny because back then when you would tell a Latino student about how he should go to college and become a doctor, they would literally laugh, like, *hey, don't come here with your jokes. We're not going to make it.* It was a tough go, but, nonetheless, it drew a lot of good people.

Because of my camaraderie with the black students, I co-founded with a gentleman by the name of Bob Fisher, not the tennis player Bob Fisher, we started the UNLV chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi. Kappa Alpha Psi, as you may or may not know, is the second oldest, and that's only by a year or two, black fraternity in the nation. I became active in that.

Once in a while I would study. I was married, I was playing golf, I was with the Latino organization, with the black organization, and then being a young man not a la Kavanaugh, but pretty close to him. But anyway, how I made it through, I don't know, but, nonetheless here I am

with a degree.

But I did try to change my degree. I wanted to get into political science, and so I dropped my music major, switched to political science. Of course, I got a call from the head of the music department, Dr. Howard Chase. Dr. Chase called me and said, "You're not going to get your scholarship anymore." I said, "Why not? I'm still delivering. I'm the same person. I'm the same reed player." At that time, I had flute and clarinet and saxophone. He said, "You're not a music major; that's part of the deal." Because, again, I was tight on money, I went back to being a music major.

I never taught a day of music in my life, never, because I started getting involved with politics because of the fact that there was so much discrimination and so many opportunities that were put aside for other people other than Latinos. What I started doing was going out into the community to get the adult Latinos behind me. Nobody knew of anybody until one of my Cuban associates here said, "There's a group of people starting the Circulo Cubano. In English it's Cuban Circle. So I went. Cubans are a very incredibly tightly knit people, at least they were then more so than now. They would allow me, because I guess they saw my sincerity in wanting to help. They help themselves. Like I said, they had their kids enrolled in, not only UNLV, but they started enrolling them at USC and UCLA and some of your better universities at the time. I know that UNLV ranks high now, but at the time UNLV was...They let me in the fold. One of the leaders turned out to be a very, very good friend of mine, Arturo Cambeiro. Arturo Cambeiro and his brother Domingo, they are the architects of the original McCarran Airport and about fifty elementary and middle schools here in Las Vegas. In fact, I think the Thomas and Mack as well, they're the original architects. Arturo was a good friend. They all were. Ulta Medea, when I met him, he had just come in from Florida. They suggested that there was an organization at that time

that was being started; hence, Horace Lopez. It was called the Nevada Association of Latin Americans. What they were telling me in essence was, "We love you; you can hang around and we'll have coffee together, but maybe you ought to go over there." And I did.

The Cubans were and are more conservative, more educated, if you will. I come over here to this organization that's just flourishing. I shouldn't use the word *flourishing* because it would be too positive. We were just starting; you don't use that word. But they concentrated on employment, education, and health. I started giving my time to—we called it NALA, N-A-L-A. We finally got a grant from the Department of Labor [DOL] for thirty-five thousand dollars. The thirty-five thousand dollars was to pay for the building or the office, for the director, for a secretary and an assistant. I gave my time originally until the grant came in. I was a temporary.

Then at that time DOL recruited me to go to work for the Department of Labor in D.C., basically an intern program, but it was a very good program. We were paid and sent around the country. I was twenty, twenty-one years old. I worked for the regional director of DOL in Atlanta, Georgia, for the governor of New York City, for the governor of Connecticut. I worked out of Window Rock, which is the Navajo Reservation, and also the Department of Labor here in San Francisco. I didn't get the job as the first paid director for NALA. A gentleman by the name of Bob Ramos got the job.

When I came back, I came back with SER jobs program, and, ironically, I didn't get that. A gentleman by the name of Larry Luna—here I am bringing the program and they give the job to Larry Luna. I've got to look into my character. What is there?

BARBARA (smiling): You need to work on that, huh?

I need to work on it. I'm an old guy, but I still need to do work. Anyway, Larry Luna got the job. So I went to work for Governor O'Callaghan. Governor O'Callaghan was the first governor to

name a black director of a department, Bob Archie, who was the director of Nevada Employment Security Department, and the first Chicano, who was Al Ramirez who at the time had been the president of NALA and he was a teacher in the school district, he and his wife. He got the job as the director of the Manpower Planning Council, it was called. Al hired me and I went to Carson City, a big mistake.

Carson City: I get there January 19th of 1971 or '72. By the way, they say, "Let's go swimming." I say, "You are incredibly insane. Where are we going to go swimming?" Carson City, by the way, had a population of fifteen thousand at the time, so I didn't envision Carson City with an indoor pool, I'm sorry. And it wasn't; it was outside. But it was thermal water and it was like swimming in ninety-eight-degree water, and the snow falling on you when you're out there in the snow. That's when I first noticed that Governor O'Callaghan was missing a leg. I had not known that. I saw him limp. But he used to go there almost every day to swim in those thermal waters. They had five or six private rooms and they ranged from ninety-eight to a hundred, a hundred and one, a hundred and two degrees. You ever been in a hundred-and- two-degree water? It will take you two hours to get in. It did me anyway. Your body has to acclimate. But the water is just incredible.

I worked with Al and then I came back here to Las Vegas as the NALA director of that NALA program, the paid director. Ten thousand dollars I would make.

BARBARA: What year is that?

It was I believe '73, '74. Seventy-three it had to have been, yes, because in '74 we moved offices. The office, if you will, was just incredible because it was behind a bar on the corner of Main and Bonanza. It was a raunchy area at the time.

LAURENTS: That was the original office?

Yes. I can't remember the name of the bar. A guy who was a journalist for the Review-Journal, Don Digilio, used to hang out at that bar, and so I would see Don every now and then. He used to write some very good columns. Anyway, you would turn on the light and all these things run out, ugh. At my house, now and forever, the word is not allowed, and so I won't say the word. But it's those little things that will go and hide.

Anyway, it was the fight of my life; I would fight everybody to employ Latinos. The contract was with the Department of Labor and we would report to the Nevada Employment Security Department, Bob Archie, and then later on...I can't think of the other guy's name that took over. It was a rough time, but it just taught me a lot. Horacio was the president later on, after Al. I would do all the letters and everything else.

One of the things that we did, because the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission would come in, we filed a consent decree against the hotels. They weren't employing Latinos. The only Latinos they would employ were the Cubans. The thing here—and what I'm about to say, take it with a grain of salt because it is very hard to...I won't get into that. I'll just simply say that there were favors owed. The word *juice* in Las Vegas has been, has always been a keyword in employment. I don't know too many people that actually got their job on their own. Everybody has juice and that juice gets you in. We just didn't have the juice, we, the Latinos, the Mexicans, the Mexican Americans; the Cubans did. Then we filed a decree, this discrimination complaint against the hotels.

We won. But here is the irony, going back to I've got to do something about me. As we were about to file, the person that was representing the EEOC asked me if I would allow the women to come into our complaint. Of course, I said, "Yes," because women were also being discriminated against, harshly, and I said, "Yes." When it happened, when it hit, because we

were all in the same numbers game, the people that were given some of those opportunities were females, white females. But nonetheless, we just kept knocking at the door. To this day there's such a disparity between whites and Latinos, but at least now you see some Latinos. In those days it was very difficult.

NALA served a major purpose in all this, and that's when I met a gentleman by the name of Harry Reid and another gentleman by the name of Richard Bryan. Harry Reid was running for lieutenant governor and Richard Bryan was running for, I believe, the assembly or AG, I can't remember. I think it was AG. We met them at an annual picnic that NALA used to have. So that kind of helped us out a little bit, not with money, but with opening a few doors and that kind of stuff.

We started doing okay when Richard Bryan ultimately became a U.S. Senator; back in '89 he hired me as a constituent services representative because by that time—I need to come back a little bit and say that in '74 I became the host of a Latino radio program in Spanish. It was the owners of KVOV, a Jewish couple by the name of Sy and Evelyn Newman. They had had a few people, so-called pioneers, in radio: Fred Flores who worked one year and then the Reyes brothers worked a couple of years. Then they asked me if I wanted to take over because the Reyes brothers weren't paying their rent. What it was at the time is that they would sell me the time and then I would pay back; I would broker the time, in essence, so I had commercials going. We were the only game in town. There was nothing, not even a flier in Spanish back in those years; that was back in '74, '75, '75, et cetera.

Then I became a member of the KNPR board that we brought in KNPR. To this day, and don't ask me why, and one of these days before I die, I'll get a lawyer, going back... KNPR has never recognized not only me but also Eddie Escobedo, Sr. We are the reason why the FCC gave

them the license, because they promised that they were going to do bilingual radio. What a joke that was.

Here I was on that board and then on the NALA board and a few other boards. So when Dick Bryan came in, he hired me because I had helped him work on the campaign. I had helped working on their campaigns, Harry Reid and Bryan, for years, since I met them.

BARBARA: This is for Bryan's campaign for...

U.S. Senator. Because Bryan at that time was governor. Bryan never directly helped, although he's an attorney and all that, but he pointed the way to some of the stuff that we could do. The Stardust and a few other places were saying, "You can't speak Spanish on our property." We changed that.

LAURENTS: Casinos had restrictions on the language?

Yes.

For their employees?

No, no, no, their employees. The only time an employee could speak Spanish was that if Pepito Pérez came in from Mexico City and said, "¿Dónde está el baño?" And they [the employee] could say, "Allá." That was basically it. Anyway, it was one of those things that Bryan led the way, as did Harry Reid, and I helped, again, on their campaigns. Every campaign that they had, I was there as a volunteer.

It's funny because on the radio I was talking about this, the way that I spoke Spanish in those years. Here I am on the radio speaking Spanglish and I had people calling in. I had two hours a day; they were from twelve to two.

What was the name of the program?

"Variedades musicales." I would get people calling in and saying, "Get off the radio. You're

destroying our language. You're embarrassing us." But the more complaints I got—by the way, that was five times a day, and we were on seven days a week. It really forced me, aside from the fact that Mr. Zermanski had gotten on my case, very nicely, by the way. He was European; he wasn't American. That's why he was treating me nicely at UNLV. Anyway, I learned to read and write and speak it as fluently as I can. I think I'm good at it now.

Anyway, it was a matter that Dick Bryan saw the positives and so he hired me. Really I was very happy to help out. That gave me more outreach in the community. I could touch more people and everything else, and with more credibility. Renaldo Martinez was the first Chicano chief of staff for any U.S. Senator. Obviously, he was the chief of staff for Harry Reid, as a congressman and then as a senator.

Governor Bob Miller saw that I was involved in the community and everything else, so he asked me if I wanted to be appointed to a position that he had because he noticed, the governor did, that there weren't any Latinos in state government. There were approximately thirteen thousand employees and no Latinos. When I say "no Latinos," I mean nobody beyond the janitor and maybe a clerk or two. He hired me as the Equal Employment Opportunity officer for the State of Nevada. I go back to Carson City, but my home was here. I had an office here and I had an office in Carson City—no, in Reno—no, in Carson City.

The reason I'm kind of mixed up is that later on, like a year into that job, Governor Miller terminated Delia Martinez. Delia Martinez was the executive director of the Nevada Equal Rights Commission. He asked me if I would take on the job as the interim director and I said I would. So I had two jobs; I was the director of the Equal Employment Opportunity office for the state—and, by the way, I was the first Chicano cabinet member for the state. I had two offices here in Vegas and I had an office in Carson City and an office in Reno. We took on a number

cases and everything else, and, at the same time, I'm the president of this organization called Hispanics In Politics.

Back in '75 is when I quit NALA because NALA started getting a little too convoluted in their presence and they stopped taking certain cases where they should have because everything was rough. There was nothing pretty. Doors were closed. You had to kick them in.

I remember when Bob List was governor, a guy by the name of Bob Agonia. Bob is half-Chicano and half-Filipino. Bob and I went to see Governor List. He doesn't remember this, by the way. I saw him about a year ago and I talked to him. Anyway, I thanked him, nonetheless. There is Bob List and we said, "Why are you restricting employment of anybody by saying that you have to be a U.S. citizen? Why do you have to be a U.S. citizen to work for the State of Nevada? To hand out a driver's license or to hand out a pamphlet?" He stopped and he said, "I guess you're right. Maybe you're right." So he changed it that whereby you have to be a legal resident, but he took off that thing about being a U.S. citizen.

We did the same—no, this was another guy, a Puerto Rican guy by the name of Rudy Navarro. Rudy was a close friend of Oran Gragson, who was then the mayor of Las Vegas. Rudy and I went to see the mayor because chief of police, John Moran—Las Vegas, by the way, at that time had their own police force, the City of Las Vegas. John Moran was a big ass guy. The word Moran was not because he was Latino, or Moran (Spanish pronunciation). He was Irish. That's when I found out that, hey, wait a minute, wow, we all come from the same loaf of bread.

Anyway, John was, well, very reticent, very reluctant to hire Latinos. We go to the mayor and say, "Mayor, what would you say is the tallest Asian person that you've ever met?" I take that back. "The average Asian?" The mayor said, "Probably about five-six, five-seven, maybe five-eight." I said, "Okay, why are you restricting us?" Because we're not five-nine—well, Larry

Mason is, but I don't know where the hell he got that extra foot and a half. The guy says, "You're right." I said, "They fight crime in Mexico. They fight crime in Japan and China. Why are you restricting us from employment?"

LAURENTS: Was there a height requirement for being a police officer?

Yes, five-eight. The minimum that you could be is five-eight. In other words, bruiser and five-eight is the size that they wanted. The mayor calls in John Moran and here comes John, very intimidated, a really tall guy. He comes in and sits down. He says that he wants him to explain. "Well, they can fight guys." "Well, they fight guys in Mexico," says the mayor. "And they can do this." "Well, they do that in Japan." Et cetera. "Okay, okay," he says. "Let me put it this way," the mayor says. "I'll take off the height requirement." He gets up and he says in a really harsh tone, "But they still have to pass a psychological and the test." And he walked out.

Now, instead of having to try to stretch ourselves as much as we possibly could, at least now we can spend time just studying and trying to pass the test. That proved also to be basically negative because John Moran was still the chief of police when all this stuff happened. I had a nephew who applied for the Metropolitan Police Department. He was turned down because of psychological concerns. Moran was at that time running for sheriff. I went to him and I said, "Why are you doing this?" I said, "What can you prove about psychological?" He said, "Well, there's some guys that if they're under stress, they're going to do all kinds of stupid things." I said, "But that's kind of somebody's opinion, right?" I said, "Are there really doctors, a psychiatrist that are working?" "No, no, it's not; it's just the police department." Again, he was running for office, and so he said however, "Tell your nephew to come see me and we'll do something about it." My nephew had no intentions of doing that anymore. He saw the writing on the wall, so he just didn't do it.

But, again, they began to ease up on that, but it wasn't really until actually Joe Lombardo came in that those changes started taking place. That's because Jose Soloreo and I sit on the Metro Multicultural Advisory Council, and so we're harping away at changing things. With the graduating classes, if you pay attention to it, they're having 24 percent, 30 percent, 36 percent, 38 percent Hispanic officers being brought in, and they're still recruiting them, and females I might add.

Always in my mind also, aside from the fact that we get discriminated against, females in general also get a lot of discrimination, and so it's always been fighting for Latinos and females. My God, there's so much more.

The school district—I used to deal with Kenny Guinn (former superintendent). He and I used to have sessions because there were no teachers at all. Right now, as I understand it, there's only five Latino principals in the entire school district. It's a harsh thing, so I try to help out as much. You'll see in that thing that I belong to advisory council, SOT it's called, for Global High School and I was just voted onto the East Tech Career Academy, as far as the parent SOT on that.

Here is another thing. The school district supposedly fought for a parental—what is it?—the way they issue punishment, if you will. There's a name for it and I can't think of it. It's so new; it's only two months old. They formed this committee for the school district and they leave out Latinos. I go and complain: I say, "What the hell is this?" "Well, we have Linda Cavazos." And I go, "Well, Linda Cavazos, number one, is a trustee. Linda Cavazos, number two, is not a part of your council. She is an advisory council." I said, "The only reason you brought her on is because you have to have a trustee on to approve this MOU that you just signed."

Supposedly they're now considering—considering is the keyword here—at least five

individuals, of which I am one, to now be included, because they put me on the advisory. I said, "Okay, advisory...I want more than advisory. Don't give me this. Forty-seven percent of students in Clark County are Latinos and you're limiting this membership to just one and you just named her on because she's a trustee." I said, "No, it's not possible." But I'm on the advisory. I didn't turn that down because at least it's a foot in the door. But now I'm fighting to have at least three members put on this council, and even then we're having a hell of a time.

It's all over. It's not done. The work isn't done. It's sad to see so many people my age—maybe I should follow suit, but I don't—who are retired. But that word *retired* is like retired from life. We have so many knowledge and everything else. Okay, at one time maybe you couldn't speak out because you had a boss. Now you don't have a boss. Speak out now with your knowledge as to what you know. It's one of those things where here I am, again going back to some of those committees. There are so many, many things that are happening here.

I was the manager of government affairs for Mirage Resorts. Mirage Resorts owns all these hotels. Wait a minute, Latinos were at a certain level and, *whammo*, that's it. When I first started with Mirage Resorts, I started as assistant manager of the employee relations and that allowed me to go behind the house at the Mirage, seven thousand employees by the way, and see what was up. Well, not much was up. You had housekeepers that had been housekeepers forever who was supervisors, but they were not administrators. Mr. [Steve] Wynn, Mrs. [Elaine] Wynn, how can that be? They started promoting some people from within. They started also bringing in people from outside.

Again, it was one of those things where you have to be there to be able to make a change. The problem is that at least I was working for the Wynns who were broad-minded enough to listen and not to immediately rear back and say, "Who the hell are you coming...?" Of course, I

wasn't out there banging on doors; I'm on the desk or on the table. Mrs. Wynn has always been very community oriented, so that was obviously a couple of steps in the right direction that she already was aware of what was going on. She and I served on a couple of committees, by the way, together. I don't know if you remember the Rodney King situation. How old are you, by the way? The Rodney King situation where there was community uprising?

LAURENTS: Yes, I'm aware.

I was one of the ward captains. Mrs. Wynn, because she gave a few dollars, was one of the people that was on this panel that basically we would meet with them periodically to discuss what we were doing and what we were trying to do to prevent rioting from happening. She noticed that and she noticed that I was on a couple of other committees. When they hired me, they knew basically that I just was not basically going to keep quiet. I was not rude and never have been.

I have always, always, always dressed with a coat and tie because when I first started in the City of North Las Vegas, I showed up just in regular trousers and a jean jacket and they almost threw me out. In those years it was, like I said, discrimination you've never faced until Las Vegas. It was so horrible, worse than in Texas, worse than what I described a while ago. Anyway, you only had a few people, like Oran Gragson, again, who are broad-minded, who listened, and who did not immediately, "Oh, there you go again, the race card." No.

It's always been to try to represent—and pardon me for putting it this way—my people in that regard. Even today, although now I find there's fifty people in a room and I'm the only one with a coat and tie, which is kind of embarrassing. I was at a meeting yesterday at the Public Education Foundation. There had to have been thirty men and I was the only one with a coat and tie. There was a guy with a coat. Anyway, it does allow me to have the audience. So Steve Wynn

and that, they allowed certain things to be said and certain changes and corrections to be made, very broad minded as far as that's concerned.

It was because of Steve Wynn. If you look at the population figures, it wasn't until Steve Wynn actually started building...that the Latino population started growing. That's why sometimes they don't participate in anything; there's no roots. In El Paso, my God, we have people that—again, Texas was a part of ours. You can imagine the number of Latinos that had roots, my father being one of them. As I said to you before, he actually paid to vote. Here it's so difficult to do that. I was the state representative for the National Council of La Raza, and, my God, even an organization like that the name cannot draw out somebody from a house.

BARBARA: Explain that a little more fully for me with Steve Wynn. What was his impact again?

He was very broad-minded.

Because he would employ more?

That he would employ, yes. Steve Wynn—and I know this probably is having—

That's another story.

Yes. Because he did listen. I do not even want to make you guys pretend that he and I would sit drinking coffee or beer and talking about this stuff. It was through channels. Basically, there were only two channels, the director and the vice president, Alan Feldman, who is just a beautiful human being, just an absolutely gorgeous human being. He would open up these lines of communication and he would point out. As long as you reasonably presented something, they would listen and they listened considerably.

Steve Wynn, for example, when I headed—I was if not the first, among the first, I think the first, to bring naturalization service from the federal courthouse to Treasure Island, from the

federal courthouse to Mirage Resort where we trained or we educated or we taught, if you will, fellow employees how to take the test, how to study for the test and all that. The Wynns paid for everything. The buffet, it wasn't just a doughnut and a cup of coffee. It was really a la Wynn.

They encouraged that.

They encouraged it. It was like sending out personal messages to them how proud they were they had taken this step into citizenship, very positive. That was so beautiful. When you have that kind of reaction to the stuff that you try to do, you can't help but feel like, hey, I accomplished one thing. They were the ones that the implosions came about.

When I first came to Vegas in '67, when I literally moved here in '67, there were probably twenty-two, twenty-five thousand, maybe that much, Latinos in Clark County, and that included an influx of the Cuban refugees that were being sent here. It was something to see, all the people coming here. Then, of course, the construction of Las Vegas where at every construction site—perhaps some people don't like for me to say this, but I will—that out of maybe ten employees or ten workers, six or seven were Latinos. Why? Try being outside in a hundred-and-fifteen-degree weather with a pick and shovel. It was something to really see. It's a phenomenon. For me, I love it so much, the fact that I came here in '59 and saw the little parks and the little oasis. The tallest building was on the corner of Las Vegas Boulevard and Charleston, the Collette Building was four stories high. That was the tallest building in those days. The Flamingo, where I worked for a week as a room service waiter, they had three floors, and four if you want to include the penthouse. The reason they gave in those days was that the airport didn't allow it. Then the Dunes came about and the Dunes was fairly high. I can't remember how many floors. The Dunes was there after the Flamingo. All the sudden, Steve Wynn comes and there are high-rises everywhere.

He had an excellent idea, a beautiful idea, before the Mirage if I remember correctly, when they were trying to do something with Fremont Street. He said, "Why don't we tear down the street and make it like a canal?" A la Venice. Of course, everybody laughed at Mr. Wynn, except obviously later on when it actually came to fruition ironically by one of the guys—

By Sheldon Adelson instead.

Yes. Anyway, I don't know where to start or where to end or anything else. The battle is still going.

LAURENTS: I do have a couple of points I want to hit.

First, we kind of glanced over Hispanics In Politics. You mentioned it. Could you talk a little bit more in depth of Hispanics In Politics?

Going back to the Cuban Circle, the most I can say is this; that they were going to form the Cuban Chamber of Commerce back when. Governor O'Callaghan was very, very aware of society and its people. He said, "No, I won't support a Cuban Chamber of Commerce. What happens to all the other Latinos?" "Well, they can form their own." "No," he said, "That's not good."

He sent a lady that used to work for him by the name of Aida Brents from Zacatecas, Mexico. Aida went and delivered the message to the Cubans and the Cuban Circle and said, "It can't be done. The governor would be happier if you changed the name and embraced others." Hence, the Latin Chamber of Commerce.

We had this organization. Now what do we do with it? Well, we can fight for businesses and all that, which they do. But we can't open too many doors. We need politics to open those doors. They formed in 1980 the Hispanics In Politics organization, a 501(c)(4) organization, (c)(4) being that Hispanics In Politics could endorse in political races. It became, in essence, a

private entity within a private entity.

It picked up a lot of force because the vote and to be able to say, "I vote for Laurents; I support Laurents in his fight for the assembly." Well, it gives the organization impact. It started getting muscle, if you will. In 1995, a judge—by the way who is a Chicano—Judge John Mendoza, who was literally born in Las Vegas—John was a football player on a Vegas high School team that never lost a game. In fact, nobody ever scored against them; that's how tough that team was. John was picked up by Notre Dame and he went to Notre Dame and got his law degree at Notre Dame and came back and became the first and only Chicano district attorney for the County of Clark and then became the first judge at the Family Court. The Family Court that you see now was basically built by John; i.e., John was powerful as heck. He was a strong leader. Not only that, his demeanor was such that don't mess around with John; that kind of thing.

In fact, I remember one time when I was—he and I were good friends—I was called in for jury duty. I had had the first free-standing record shop in the entire state of Nevada, Light and Sound Record Shop was the name of it, right on the corner of Maryland Parkway and Sahara. I had been broken into and they stole my cash register, merchandise, all kinds of stuff. I was upset, not because they broke in there—obviously I was—but because the cops said to me, "Don't ever think we're going to get your stuff back. You're not priority."

Ironically, a month or two later, I was summoned for jury duty. So I go there. Lo and behold, it's Judge Mendoza who is on the bench. The attorney said to me, "How do you feel about policemen?" I said, "Well, let me tell you how I feel about policemen. They are not doing their job." Well, before I finished the word *job*, John got up and started yelling at me, "Get the hell out of my court. I don't want you in my court."

We're friends, right? That's how strict and how powerful and how devoted, I guess if you

will, to law enforcement John was. By the way, he had been a cop himself. So out went Fernando, out the door. I would do the same thing now, by the way, but it was funny the way his reaction was. But I admired him that much more because of that.

When he became president for the Latin Chamber of Commerce, he saw all this power that HIP had. He invited me for lunch. I was, by the way, not only the president of HIP, but I was also the chair of the entertainment committee, bringing in a lot of money. They bring in a lot of money, those entertainment committees. Anyway, he said to me, "I want you to do two things, Fernando. I want you to resign from the entertainment committee." "John, I'm doing such a good job, but if you have somebody else that can do better, it's yours." He said, "And I want you to resign the presidency of HIP." That's when I say, "Whoa. Whoa, sir. I'm not an attorney, but I'm going to tell you that you can't do that." Et cetera.

Anyway, big, big, big fight. The board is involved. In those years those two organizations probably held whatever Latino force and power—I'll use that word—it was between HIP and the chamber. It was messy, but we managed to separate. One vote separated us and that was Judge Vega, Valorie Vega who said, "HIP should be allowed to do their own thing." It was her vote that set us free, if you will. But that was it.

We continued every month for twenty-three years, by the way, since that year, March of '95 that we have had this once-a-month early morning breakfasts, which we invite politicians. You guys are invited. We have our meeting tomorrow. It's the first Wednesday of every month. But we invite people, like the ones we invited for tomorrow, which is Steve Sisolak, Susie Lee, Rob Mayes, and Jimmy Vega, who is trying to do the unthinkable and throw out a constable for North Las Vegas. Anyway, we have people in that vein. We had Henry Cisneros, Dolores Huerta, Governor O'Malley from Maryland; people who have impact. We're the only political

nonprofit organization that is nonpartisan, so we have people from both sides.

Four years ago, we were credited—and something I don't like—but we were credited with having elected the entire Republican constitutional offices, but that was the makeup of the organization. That's what you get for being diplomatic. It's an organization that has teeth, I think. But we try to maintain as neutral as we possibly can when we can, and when we don't we go full force. Anyway, we try to get involved with the community and do voter registration and everything else, although we do give leeway to the organizations that are actually built to go out there and do voter registration. Those kids are paid. Those young people are paid and we're not; we're all volunteers. I don't want to get in their way. I did when I was director for the National Council of La Raza. The National Council of La Raza was upset me because I would go someplace representing NCLR and the newspaper would give the credit to HIP. They were really pissed off, so they basically broke my contract; it ended; it stayed ended. But that's okay.

Again, we try to get as much involved in politics as we can and try to be as objective as we possibly can. We have gone against the grain many times. We went against the marijuana and we lost. We lost in more ways because now I have to go out there and fight again because the money is not coming into the education as it should be. Now we're going to be on the forefront of that.

Some people hate us. Some people hate us, but that's the way it is. Imagine you're a Democrat and the Democrats call you dyno because you're not as much a Democrat as they want you to be, and the same thing with the Republicans. Imagine me, I've got both. It's one of those things, but I dance to the music and I'm an old guy and I can do that.

BAARBARA: Way too self-deprecating.

LAURENTS: There's another program that I was reading about when I was doing

research, Bien Bonito Bilingual Program.

Oh. I've always been involved with education. In my opinion there is no more noble career than a teacher. Teachers are what make us be what we want to be for the most part. For them to be beaten, and downtrodden, and all that, it just upsets me to no end. But in those years, you couldn't speak Spanish and everything else. I don't know if you ever heard of the name Andrew Martinez. Andrew was a teacher in the school district and Andrew cared for the students. He didn't care too much about some of our activities and didn't want to make waves, which is why Andy would teach literally in the janitor's broom closet; he would teach the students English because they wouldn't allow him to teach it in the classroom. This was on spare time.

You may or may not remember the bilingual program. I never liked it. You go into school and they teach you Spanish the first two years, and then they teach you both languages the third year, and then they concentrate on English the fourth year. We tried to bring it into Vegas into the Clark County School District. And because I had been fighting all along to do changes, I was named the chairperson of the Bien Bonito Bilingual Program. I immediately got people riled up at me because they gave us this big budget. I said, "No, no, I don't want that big budget. All it's going to do is draw people against us. The guy next door, my next-door neighborhood, they're going to say, 'No, that's too much money for these people.'" These people. "No," I said, "Let's be more reasonable. Let's start at a level where we can build from there and show that we can do something."

The Bien Bonito program lasted about three or four years, but it never really materialized into what people at the time wanted it to. By the way, we didn't get that kind of money anyway, but it was because there were too many, as there are now, roadblocks. Right now we have the ELL program that has five hundred million dollars involved in it and I haven't seen a cent of it,

nothing at all. Unless you guys have, and if you have, point the way. We're out there fighting.

Superintendent Skorkowsky had his job because I am the one that pushed for him. Elaine Wynn, by the way, that year I guess that's when she gave me back our engagement ring because she got pissed off. She wanted us to go outside and I wanted him because he knew the politicians, the politicians knew him, and so he would start with a two- or three-year advantage. Unfortunately, they took advantage of him and it is what it is. Now we have Jesus Jara and hopefully Jesus does the job.

But what I'm saying is that we allowed too many outside forces, politicians, to get in here. We had a guy by the name of Tom Skanky who is a real jerk. He's a political operative and he comes in and out of the clear blue sky just takes one-point-five million dollars from the budget and nobody says anything. It's like you having a drawer in here. You just cashed your paycheck and you put the money in there. I come in. You're here. He's here. I take the money and walk off and nobody says anything. That's Tom Skanky because nothing has ever come of that one-point-five million. And that was only two years ago, by the way.

Anyway, I'm sorry, that's a long roundabout way to answer what the bilingual program was. Yes, we tried it. It's beginning to work, but it still hasn't kicked off. It still hasn't kicked off and I'm very upset about it. We're having a meeting tomorrow on that by the way.

I was reading you formed the Tequila Party in 2010 as a form of protest in Arizona; was that correct?

BARBARA: I want to know where the tequila is.

¿Dónde? No, no. I've got a bottle in my car. I'll bring it up in a minute.

The Tea Party had grown fangs, forget about teeth, and they were getting everything. What happened is that I said, "We need to do something the equivalent of the Tea Party." If I

called it Coffee Party or Tea, whatever, Milk and Honey, it isn't going to have any impact. So I came up with this Tequila Party. I was getting calls from Spain, from Brazil, from Australia about the Tequila Party. In other words, it had the bang that it wanted it to have. I'm answering phone calls on all this.

There's a jerk by the name of George Harris, and he is jerk supreme, this guy is. Hispanic background, but obviously not that much. But George is for George. He had a restaurant at that time. He and his girlfriend, who is now with somebody else—she's originally—her folks are—from Guadalajara. She's from El Paso where I'm from. Guadalajara is where the tequila comes from and the agave plants come from. They have a tequila called Alien Tequila. This friend of mine, my compadre—I baptized his daughter—says, "Call George; call George." I said, "No, he's a jerk," and blah, blah, blah. I finally succumb to this pressure and I call George. The next day George and a guy by the name of Chuck Moot—he's a real super...I'll just use the initials...A hole. Anyway, he writes a—which I didn't read, by the way—a blog. And Irma Guirrez is her name. They actually literally submitted the paperwork to get the Tequila Party for them, and so I was lost.

Then I got a call from a young lady by the name of DeeDee Garcia Blase from Phoenix, Arizona, and she's a really powerful leader, a very nice lady. Anyway, she says, "Can I have the name?" I explained what I just explained to you guys. She said, "No, I'm going to make it national. That's local. I'm going to make it national." I said, "DeeDee, go for it." And DeeDee did. It's still there, by the way. It's got, I would say, about twelve thousand members.

I'm going to push for her because with the political climate as it is now, we need something again to start. The Democrats are doing whatever they're doing. The Republicans, well, we know what they're doing. The only ones that are suffering is us, us. There's sixty-

million of us in this country. We can have a powerful, I mean powerful, voting bloc and we're too naive or too...I don't know what it is. I don't even want to say it. We just don't do it. Now maybe with the Tequila Party going national, we may be able to do something.

Anyway, that's what it was. It still is there. If you want to Google D-E-E-D-E-E, one word, Garcia Blase, she's very good. She's very intelligent and very astute politically and otherwise.

LAURENTS: The National Council de La Raza, they changed their name to UnidosUS recently.

I don't know. Like I said to you before, they didn't renew my contract. They were incredibly jealous of the fact that their name was not the one that came up in the papers. I told them, "We have been here..." Whatever it was at the time, thirty-four years. "It's hard for the community to all of a sudden look at me and look at La Raza and not look at HIP." In fact, one day they sent one of their administrators. He was in my office when I got a call from the Las Vegas Sun. It was on some story. It was around the time when DACA was coming about. They asked me about it and I told them. I said, "I'm going to give you the information that you want only if you promise me that you will say, Fernando Romero—use my name—National Council of La Raza. You have got to do that." "Yes, I'll promise you that." The next day, "Fernando Romero, President of Hispanics In Politics." By the way, the administrator was sitting right there. So I showed him the paper. That didn't matter. But anyway, that was it.

La Raza, I found it to be more of a lobbying group than a community oriented thing. It's a powerful group. They got a lot of money from McDonalds and Ford Foundation, so they're pretty corporate minded. They'll get your idea and then they'll build on it. They're the Japanese of the car market, I guess. They get something and then they embellish on it and here you are. Here is a

Toyota or here is a Lexus. Basically, that's what it is. Now, with the new change, I don't hear the word at all, at all, just nothing. They were here a week ago, in fact. They're trying to do something with healthcare, but I don't think it's going anywhere. I don't know.

I wanted you to speak a little bit more with your experience working in Bob Miller's cabinet as the first Latino in Nevada.

Bob was a genuine champion of our cause. I only attended a couple of meetings, by the way. I told him who I was. And he's going to look into your employment background, your employment records to make sure that there is diversity in your departments, and he'll help you out in employment and everything else. It never came about. People have mind-sets and there's history and it ain't going to happen.

We had the Department of Wildlife Conservation, I think is the name of it. I'll drop a figure. Take or add ten. A hundred and thirty employees statewide. *Nada*, not one minority. They have a job open for an engineer, and, lo and behold, there's no Chicano engineers. Yes, there are. We had a Chicano engineer, we had an Asian engineer, and then a white engineer apply for the job, and others of course, but they've whittled it down to those three. Apparently, the Asian was the guy that had a lot more wide experience and deep experience. Then they hire—I'll just drop a name; I'll just make up a white name—Joe Brown.

I called the director of it and said, "What the hell is this? Didn't you hear the governor say what he...?" "Yes, I did." "You had two other minorities you could have chosen. They're equally as intelligent, equally as good. Why did you hire this guy?" "Because he flies a plane." "And the employment specs say that the engineer must fly a plane?" "No." "Then why the hell did you do that?" "Well, because he flies a plane." I said, "That makes no sense."

Anyway, the guy remained on the job because they brought in lawyers and said, if we fire

him, "We have to do this, that and the other." It is basically a domino theory. Somebody hires you from Michigan and you go to Michigan and they say, "Oops, we made a mistake." So you give up your job and now Barbara has hired somebody else and all this other stuff. Now where are you going? You can't come back. So now what do you do? You file a lawsuit against somebody. That was basically the thing here. It was like the perennial cure being a lot more expensive than the illness.

That was just a sample of what I was up against. You're up against history. It's funny and ironic. I was watching this program yesterday on TV. The young lady says, "It's my heritage and my culture and my history." Well, history is in the past. Your future is out here. But Nevada doesn't look at it that way. They still look at the history and all that other stuff.

I belong to an organization called Leadership Las Vegas. Leadership Las Vegas is basically—it will sound a little weird—but it's the crème de la crème of the community basically. Not only that, you have to pay thousand dollars to belong—to be considered, I might add. You lose two thousand if you're not considered. What you gain if you are, I don't know. But anyway, you're out two thousand dollars any way you look at it. But I was fortunate enough that Mirage Resorts paid for mine.

Leadership Las Vegas has classes once a month and you have all the participants join in. One was them was the history of Las Vegas and I was one of the panelists. I spoke about the Mormon influence here in Las Vegas because back when I was with the Nevada Association of Latin Americans, we did a kick ass job against Moapa and Logandale. They would bring in the Mexicans and the Mexicans would pick the onions and the radishes and all that and then they would call immigration. By the way, they would tell the Mexicans, "We haven't sold the crops yet, so there's no money there. But when the money comes in, we're going to pay you." Not only

that, they had right in the center—this is terra, this is land, just dirt—and in the middle is like apartments. The word *apartments* is too nice here. They had housing where you had five or six people per room. In the center of that was a waterspout where they would, you name it, brush their teeth, make their coffee, drink their tea. They used everything from that waterspout.

A guy by the name of Lou Bolarte—Lou died at a young age—but Lou Bolarte and I were out there and we were livid. We got with the Department of Immigration. "Why are you doing this? Why do you go out there? You know what the hell they're doing." Immigration would say, "Hey, they're calling us and we're going." They were always being assholes.

So we reported that. Department of Labor came in and everything else, the health department. They were really upset, the Mormons were. But then they had to come up with housing and all that other stuff.

Not only that, by the way, for you, if you lived in Moapa, your father was a migrant worker and you were born there, you were raised there, now for you to get a job picking onions or doing whatever, you had to be Mormon. If you were not Mormon, you couldn't go to school or anything else. I'm talking about the '70s, okay? I'm not talking about the 1930s.

Anyway, what I just told you basically I told the class. That was the last time that I was ever called upon by the Las Vegas leadership group to go and speak on history because people don't like the truth. History is made up. Ask Christopher Columbus about that.

My last question is: In your eyes what does the future of Latinos in politics look like? More involvement?

It all depends on the set of eyes that you're looking at this with. I have seen, with all due respect, that the Latino millennial is not as...I think they basically involve themselves in order for them to move up a letter, move up a rank. Many, many millennials that I know are looking at millennial

number one. They're looking at becoming attorneys, which is fine. I was here at the time when the only Latino attorney was John Mendoza, no doctorate, by the way. I look at them going for their doctorates, which is beautiful. That's marvelous. The problem is, what the hell are you going to do with that? Where are you with that?

We've got people out there that are being underpaid. There are people that live in that same environment that I just told you about with one waterspout in Colombia, in El Salvador, in Nicaragua, in various pueblos in Mexico. They come here and these apartment owners allow two and three families in a two-bedroom apartment with no water or just a drip in the sink, cockroaches. I promised not to use that word. Yet, they're happy because they remember when all they had was a water sprout. I'm talking about this is now, not back when.

So I don't see that passion. I didn't say there wasn't any interest; there is. I see some attorneys going to the border trying to do or look into caged infants and toddlers and young men and women and boys and girls. I don't see anything done. I just see people looking. As far as even involvement in politics, in the primary elections there were eight hundred and twenty-one candidates, eight hundred and twenty-one; there were thirty-nine Latinos. In a community with 37 percent of us are Latinos, we had just the thirty-nine Latinos running for office out of eight hundred and twenty-one candidates.

We need to use our brain power to do something positive that will bring positive change, change that is permanent change. We need to empower ourselves, and we think we are. But look at this university. I've been here fifty-one years in Clark County. We've grown in size, and, yes, we've got 13 or 15 percent, but we're still not a Hispanic-Serving Institution. We're not so much into acronyms that we forget, at least I do.

BARBARA: We are working on that now.

Yet, at the community college, you've had presidents that have shown that it can be done; yet, we don't do it. In fact, we put roadblocks on things. I worked for the university back in 2000. I worked for six months. I had a contract that was not renewed because of the way I am. Hey, listen, if I think that your brown shoes don't match your black tuxedo, I'm going to tell you about it, and people don't like to hear that shit. You have Carol Harter who didn't really understand that what when Carlos Garcia was out there raping our people that it was affecting the university. What happens is that we don't utilize that power. How many board of regents are there?

LAURENTS: Six or seven, huh?

I shouldn't have said that. I'll use the word *approximate* to put us at the same plain. There are approximately twelve board of regents. How many Latinos are in those twelve? None. Yet, community college here is eighteen-plus percent Latino, thirteen-plus percent Latino here, fifteen-plus percent Latinos in Washoe County; and yet, not one, not one regent is Latino. Whose fault is it, theirs? We have a county where we comprise 33 percent; and yet, how many Latino county commissioners are there out of the seven commissioners that make the laws, that make the ordinances, that make the changes, that forces the casinos to do things that they need to do? How many are there? *Nada*. Even the school district, we have one Chicana in there. We're not even—what is it 82 percent, I think it is, or 82 percent whites. We don't have Latino.

Bob Coffin has been an elected official for the twenty-eight or twenty-nine years that I've known him. It wasn't until he became a sitting councilman for the City of Las Vegas that he started actually embracing the fact that he's actually Latino. Then you have a guy by the name of Bob Coffin. At least he's beginning to do good things. Before Bob Coffin, in a city that's a hundred years old, a hundred years old, we have never had a Latino councilman.

In North Las Vegas, a city that was founded technically in '65, '67, had never had a

Latino councilman until six years ago when they voted Isaac Barron in.

The City of Henderson, they had one mayor, Cruz Olague, as a Latino mayor back in the early seventies. They tried to control—they being the Mormons—tried to control Cruz and Cruz was very steadfast in what he wanted to do. Well, the Mormons didn't let him. The Mormons road blocked every single job that Cruz applied for; they had a *no* on it. Cruz had to drop out. He was the first Chicano to be elected mayor and he was the first person to resign as mayor for the City of Henderson because the Mormons wouldn't let him literally live. He had to give up to be able to get a job bagging groceries. Cruz wound up working for the Convention Center Authority in the setup department. He wasn't like an administrator. He was basically a supervisor or something of the sort in helping when conventions in where to put this rail and where to put that artificial grass and where to put that beautiful cherry blossom plastic tree. That was Cruz.

And Boulder City, hell, forget it about it. Try being a Chicano living in Boulder City. They had a policeman working in Boulder City. They made life miserable for the guy in Boulder City, today, now. This hasn't changed.

Yet, going back to your question, we're educating that I want to do for myself, and maybe, maybe, if I have an opportunity, with the knowledge that I have I'll do something. I hate to sound that way, but bottom line in it, tell me I'm wrong. I want you to my face say to me, "Fernando, let me tell you what we're doing," and then tell me what you're doing. The only organization that I see doing something where they're not taking money from people, they're not grabbing glory from what they're doing is the students here at the Boyd School of Law in helping the students with their immigration matters. I don't see anybody else doing it.

I was in a room one day and it was nothing but Latino organizations. The woman said, "We're being paid to do a job." I said, "I ain't being paid to do a job." "Well, the rest of us are."

Okay, what does that tell you? That if you don't pay, all that room of thirty people ain't going to be doing nothing. That should tell you a lot. I'm so negative. I shouldn't sound like that. I'm just saying that there's a future, but unfortunately the future is really into the future.

When I founded the Student Organization of Latinos in '69, I didn't think that it would take this long for us to be where we are now. I thought everybody was going to jump the bandwagon and go out there and recruit students and let students know that they can become an attorney; that they can become an engineer; that they can become a doctor. I have a niece. I haven't seen her, by the way, in twenty years. Her mentality was that "I'm going to become a doctor and I'm getting the hell out of here because Vegas doesn't have any future for me." She went to Harvard medical. She is now the head of the gastroenterology department at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. The last time I talked to her, I said, "Bonnie, please come to Las Vegas. We need you." "Fernando, there's no research in Las Vegas. There's no opportunity for me in Las Vegas. There's no following in Las Vegas. There's nothing for me in Las Vegas."

I have a nephew, her brother, who I also have not seen in twenty years, Harvard School of Economics. He's been to Spain, he's been to England, everywhere but here. That's what's happening, too, with some of the people that we have. You raise somebody up. Once you see them head for Providence, Rhode Island, or whatever, the chances of seeing that guy come back are very slim. There is a really old song, World War II song that says, "How are you going to keep them down on a farm after they see Paris?" That was the thing, when the farmers were being drafted into the army and then they go see the cancan girls in Paris and they see life as it is in other cities, do they want to go back to the farm and pick cotton or take care of the horses or the pigs? They don't.

Unfortunately, it's the same problem, and I just wish that I could do something, but it's

very difficult. It's very difficult for me to tell you what to do. I can suggest to you, but the ultimate decision is yours. The problem is that when you call a call to arms, you don't have people show up for the call to arms. You have the same twenty people. The same twenty people show up with a picket sign to walk the line. That's another problem and I see it at HIP. When I have people like Sisolak—at least it's a fifty-fifty chance; now, a fifty-fifty chance in Las Vegas, that's pretty damn good—of being governor. Yet, I can bet you that tomorrow if I have fifty people show up to a breakfast meeting tomorrow, that will be a lot; and if thirty-five of those fifty people are Latino, that's a lot. But there is a guy who is going to be the next governor and they would prefer—they, these groups prefer—that he become governor so that they can then pick up a picket sign and go picket outside his office instead of having the guy there, talking to him. By the way, he's a candidate. Literally I have had Dean Heller with me; Jacky Rosen; when he was a congressman, Joe Heck; Congressman Hardy; Congressman Horsford was there a month ago at HIP. Yet, the people who have been picketing these people's offices aren't there to ask the questions: Congressman, what are you going to do when? Or, Congressman, what have you done when? No, we shy away from that kind of stuff. We have people who have degrees, bachelors and doctorates, who can go there and ask the really pertinent questions and they don't go. Why? Because maybe they're too big any more to show up to a meeting or just embarrassed to ask a question or don't want to rile people. *Uh-oh, there goes Dr. Fernandez again.* You don't want that. That was my last answer to your last question.

I'm totally sorry to take up so much time, but there's so much going on.

This is a very important part of the project. Thank you so much for sharing.

[End of recorded interview]

APPENDIX: Partial list of positions, affiliations, and honors

- Hispanics In Politics, President (lifelong member)
- Citizens Advisory Committee to Create the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Citizen Review Board
- Committee to Create Las Vegas City Wards 5 and 6, Member (four-member committee)
- Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Multi-Cultural Advisory Committee, Member
- Families for Effective Autism Treatment, Member
- KNPR, Public Radio, Founding Board
- Governor Bob Miller's Cabinet, Member (First Latino to hold this honor)
- Nevada's Equal Employment Opportunity Office, Former Director (First to hold that office)
- Nevada Equal Rights Commission, Former State Director
- Mirage Resorts, Inc., Manager Government Relations
- National Council of La Raza (NCLR), Former Nevada State Field Coordinator
- Latin Chamber of Commerce, Former Board Member (initial 15 years)
- Clark County Housing Authority, Former Chairman
- American Heart Association, Former Director, Juntos Community Education Program
- Bienvenido Bilingual Program (1980, first such program in the State of Nevada), Chairman, Title VII Advisory Council
- Leadership Las Vegas Class of '98, Greater Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, Member
- Clark County Election Department, Early Voting Committee, Member
- Nevada Fight Fraud Taskforce, Founding Member, Community Representative
- Clark County School District, Payback Program Participant

He has received numerous honors and awards, including

- "Pioneer/Trailblazer Award", KCEP Radio (2014)
- "Outstanding Young Men of America", Jaycees (1975)
- "Public Service Award" Latin Chamber of Commerce
- "Arturo Cambeiro Hispanic of the Year Award", Latin Chamber of Commerce
- "Distinguished Service Award", Pro bono Project, Clark County Bar Association