AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSÉ LUIS MELENDREZ

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 transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

Claytee D. White
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PREFACE

A proud smile comes to José Melendrez's face when he speaks of his Mexican heritage, the ethics of industrious father and the emphasis his mother placed on education. Throughout his life, Melendrez has nurtured his cultural perspectives, used his bilingual talents, and sought to assure social justice and equity in our communities. In this oral history, he also shares insights into his many identities: husband and father, son and brother, educator and mentor.

Melendrez is the current executive director for the office of Community Partnerships in the UNLV School of Public Health where he is responsible for coordinating and building partnerships that support student and faculty initiatives. He works with community-based organizations and public health agencies to support internships, research and educational programming.

He is a founding member and chair for the Nevada Minority Health and Equity Coalition. His career experiences and life path has provided him with a solid foundation in diversity, equity, and multicultural programming, community organizing, and use of community-based participatory research. He is also experienced in social justice education and advocacy as it pertains to equity initiatives for diverse populations.

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November 20, 2018
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez

Today is November 20th, 2018. My name is Laurents Banuelos-Benitez. I am in the Health Science Building at UNLV and I am joined by...

Barbara Tabach.

Today we are interviewing...

José Melendez.

José, can you spell your name for me?

José, J-O-S-E. Luis, L-U-I-S. Melendrez, M-E-L-E-N-D-R-E-Z.

Thank you. How do you identify?

It depends on what part of the country I'm in and who I'm speaking with. Based on what the United States government likes to classify us, as Hispanic; self-chosen, Latino; and then, again depending on what region I'm in, whether I'm Latino, Chicano, Mexican American, Tejano; usually here in the Southwest I go with Chicano, Mexican American.

I'd like to start at your childhood. Where were you born, and what was your childhood like growing up?

My dad [José] was in construction, and so we moved around a lot. I was actually born in Houston, Texas, and was there for about six months, and then we moved back to California. My family is from Baja, California; Tijuana; Tecate; Ensenada, Mexicali. But we lived in a little cowboy town outside of San Diego called Lakeside and that's where I grew up. I had an incredible childhood in terms of living on what would have been referred to as a ranch, but my dad ran a construction company. I don't know if you're familiar with coping. It's the stuff that they used to use on pools all the time, not brick. Now you see brick or you see deck. There used to be coping. If you look at a lot of the old houses around here in Las Vegas, you'll see coping still on the pools. My dad used to actually make his own coping. We lived outside of San Diego

in Lakeside and we had a big five-acre area that we lived on where my dad made all his own coping and ran his construction company from there. I had an incredible childhood. My dad always believed that if you work hard and you make a decent living and you do right, good things happen. He gave us a phenomenal childhood growing up, working, Little League and playing baseball.

The thing with my dad was…Spanish was our first language, and I didn't learn how to speak English until I actually got into the first or second grade where I could speak some of it because you heard it all the time. [English] wasn't our primary language. Spanish was our primary language. My dad always believed that at some point we were going to move back to Mexico. My mom [Sandra], who is an American citizen, born and raised in San Diego in the United States, she used to tell my dad, "We're never moving back to Mexico because I'm not moving to Mexico. So if you're moving to Mexico, you're moving on your own and the kids aren't going with you." They always had these interesting conversations about where they wanted to be.

My dad became a legal resident because of my mom. He helped bring all his brothers and sisters and everybody all became residents. As far as I know, most of them are still legal residents; they never became citizens. He kind of created that for a lot of his family.

Just like myself, he taught not only his brothers, his sisters, but all of us the trade that he was in. Before I got serious about college, I had learned everything there is to learn about being a mason—so if this college thing and education didn't work out, I could always go back to being a mason. So brick work, block work, those kinds of things, he taught me that. It was a good experience.

At very young age, I got exposed to playing baseball and he loved it. If I was playing

baseball, he would support that. As long as I was doing baseball, then I didn't have to worry about working. But if I wasn't playing baseball, then I'd have to go to work. Early on, at a very young age, I was actually working with my dad. I remember going back to ten, eleven, twelve years old and I was pushing wheelbarrows of cement with all the men. I think that's part of where I got my size strength-wise that I could handle a full-blown wheelbarrow loaded with cement with any man, at twelve or thirteen years old. But I loved it. The experience that he gave me learning how to work at a young age and the skill sets that I had learned have stuck with me through my entire life.

As kids, again, we moved around a lot. That I can remember we were in San Diego, in that area, and then we ended up in Nevada for a couple of years, and then we ended up in Texas for several years, and then we ended up back in California.

How many kids were in your family?

I have two other brothers and a sister, so there is four of us.

Where are you in the hierarchy?

I'm the oldest. In our family, the oldest had all the responsibility of learning to work and all those other things…I remember the summer that I was twelve. My dad walked into the room and flipped the light on. It's five o'clock in the morning. "Come on. You're old enough to go to work. Let's go." That was my summer.

What did your mom do?

My mom was a homemaker. She stayed home. My family in that sense was very traditional, not that she bought into it because she's very progressive, but the woman's place was in the home. She had graduated from high school in San Diego and had actually been offered a scholarship to go to college, but her dad told her, "No, women don't do that. Women's place is in the house." So

he didn't let her take the scholarship. She had actually gotten a scholarship at that point, which I thought was, *wow*, because she had gotten a scholarship to go play basketball, as a woman, because she was a pretty good athlete. That with her academics, and her father said no.

What era would that have been?

That was in the fifties.

That's significant. That's too bad.

When she told me that I was like, *wow*. But again, I like to consider her a very strong woman. Because my dad was always working, she was the one that dealt with the school. She was the one if we were making a trip somewhere, she would take us. If we were going to Disneyland, she was making sure that we weren't going to miss out on anything as kids. If it was Little League, then she was helping to manage the Little League teams, everything. The big trips where she would force my dad to come along, and so he would. In a Latino household, in a Mexican household, she ran the household. She told my dad what we needed, where the money needed to be spent, and so that was the relationship. She would make all the really important decisions about where money was spent, how we were raised, what kind of education, and then my dad would just come through and deliver. "You raise the kids and I'll take care of the work." That's how the relationship was and it was a good one. My dad was very much in the mind-set of the Mexican machismo, but my mom had no problem putting him in his place and speaking up, so back and forth like that. They never were like a lot of other family members; they never divorced. They had their tough times, but they worked through it for the sake of the family, for the sake of the kids.

He was also the oldest of all of his brothers and sisters and she was an only child from her family—well, not by design. One of her sisters had died at birth. Another sister at five years

old was hit by a car and passed away. She had grown up as an only child. Then her mom, my grandmother, I never really got to know because I think I was two years old when she passed away from cancer. Because of the pain, we didn't see her father, my grandfather, we didn't see him for probably a good ten years before he came around and started apologizing for his actions in how he had raised her. She made her peace with him and he spent a lot of time with us in his older years. Before he passed, he spent a lot of time with us.

Did you learn a lot about his story, about the ancestry or the heritage from there?

Not really. We knew he had grown up as part of the Pachuco era with the whole zoot suits and all that. He was part of that era growing up in San Diego. He said, "Oh, *Mijo*, if I had known you liked that stuff, I could have held onto all my suits and all this and that." God, that would have been so cool. What I like to say that was the pre-low rider era that I grew up in with Chicanoism and all that that was starting to become in San Diego. He was involved with the zoot suit riots and all that stuff that happened in San Diego and all those areas with the military. He grew up in that era and worked on the shipyards in terms of making the big ships, the warships; all that kind of stuff during World War II that he was a part of.

He was American born as well.

Yes. On my mom's side, everybody that I can tell, my mom's mom, they were all American born. I think on my mom's side is what I would be considered like third or fourth generation American. On my dad's side, because he was the first to migrant, I would be considered second generation American based on that.

Your father is originally from Tijuana?

He was born in Tijuana, but raised in Tecate. If the oral history is right, our family in Tecate, they have neighborhoods and one of the original neighborhoods in Tecate is called the Downey,

the Downey family, and so we were part of that. As I've been told, we were one of the seven families that founded or that was a part of the town that became Tecate where they make the beer, what is famous for Tecate beer. There is a big old beer factory that sits right in the middle of this town. Our family was one of the seven founding families of that town through our Downey connection. On my dad's side it's Downey, Melendez. Then on my mom's side it's Mendoza, which is a huge, huge clan, family in Tecate.

Did your father ever explain his decision to migrate to the States?

Well, he just wanted a better life. He actually graduated from high school in Mexico and he had always wanted to be an engineer. He was good with numbers, self-taught. When he was building pools, he self-taught himself how to use all the formulas and everything on how to design a pool and the landscaping and everything, all the numbers that went into how big the pool has to be to contain how much water it's going to have. He was self-taught in all that stuff. If he had his way, he would have gone to college and been an engineer, but that wasn't going to happen in Mexico. He knew he wanted a better life. I think at fourteen he was crossing over. If you are familiar with the Tecate/Baja, California area there, as soon as you crossover from Tecate into the United States, there is a bunch of working ranches, cattle, sheep, all that. At fourteen he was crossing over and working in those ranches.

When he was eighteen or nineteen, he got a job with this guy who was a mason. He had his own company and did masonry work. They were here in Las Vegas. The guy was a scuba diver. They were out at Lake Mead. He was scuba diving and then he came up from under the water and my dad saw him and he was just pale as could be. He was having a heart attack. My dad dove in and pulled him out with all the gear. He pulled him out and basically saved his life. The guy was forever beholden to him, and so he taught him everything he knew about masonry.

He said, "I'm going to teach you a profession that you'll be able to take care of your family for the rest of his life." That's how he became a mason. This guy taught him everything that he knew and at one point when he left California he turned over the entire business to my dad. Blue Haven Pools, Sunset Pools and some other one, at one point my dad had all the contracts for the three major pool companies all in Southern California. We would go all over Southern California doing work. That's how my dad got into that trade.

My mom had wanted to go to college, but, like I said, she wasn't able to. But when she was in her fifties, she decided she wanted to go back and so she went back and got a two-year associates degree from College of Southern Nevada. My dad was still like, "I don't understand why you're doing this." She goes, "Because I've always wanted a degree." He paid for it and supported her. He couldn't understand it, but he paid for it and supported her, and so she went back and got her associates degree from the College of Southern Nevada.

What was your education like, high school and middle school?

Again, I started off not knowing and not speaking any English. We started off in public school in California, which you think would have had more advancement with all the Latino history there. I started off in public school and went through kindergarten and went through first grade. I got into second grade and I failed second grade in California. The medical people for the school said that I needed to be checked out because they felt I was mentally retarded, which is why I wasn't learning and had failed the second grade. They had me go to their doctors and they did all kinds of tests. The doctors from the school said, "Yes, he's mentally retarded." My mom took me to our doctor and the doctor did what he did and he goes, "There's nothing wrong. This kid is not mentally retarded. The only problem he has is that he doesn't speak English well enough to understand what's going on." My mom got pissed, pulled us out of public school and put us in

Catholic school. Back then there were still nuns in the schools. She put us in Our Lady of Perpetual Help right there in Lakeside, California, and they got us back on track and I learned to speak English. That was my thing there. I was always one year behind. A normal kid would graduate from high school at eighteen. I graduated at nineteen. I got back on track.

Again, we ended up moving around a lot, so I was in private school here in Reno. Eighth grade, I actually graduated from Saint Christopher's Catholic School here in Las Vegas. I was set to go to Gorman. I was set to go to Gorman because that was the Catholic high school. I was set to Gorman and a week before it was supposed to start—and I had talked to the football coaches and the baseball coaches because, again, sports was my thing—my dad came home from somewhere; he had gone to talk to folks. He came home and said, "All right, we're moving to Texas." I went, "What?" He said, "We're moving to Texas. I just got a job. We're moving to Texas."

You actually lived in Las Vegas, then moved away.

Yes, yes, then moved away. The guy who trained him, he had made Las Vegas his home, so we were constantly...When he left my dad in California with everything, he had moved to Las Vegas, so we were constantly coming to Las Vegas all the time. As a kid and as an adult, Las Vegas has always been a part of our world, always.

So you've seen it change a lot.

Oh, yes. My dad used to say all the time—it was funny as heck because he would say—back then when we were living here in that time that was '77 to 1980 and my dad was doing work here. One of the jobs he completed for this guy, the guy said, "Hey, listen, instead of me paying you, would you take some land in exchange?" My dad said, "Land? Land doesn't put food on my table." He goes, "Where is the land?" He said, "It's the whole area right there, the corner of

Charleston and Rainbow." My dad looked at it and said, "Las Vegas is never going to get that big." He turned him down, a couple of acres right in that area.

My dad used to call *mijo*, son. He goes, "You know, *Mijo*, we would be very rich if I had taken that deal." I was like, "Yes, Dad, you would have."

That's a classic Las Vegas story.

Yes. He said, "Nah, Las Vegas is never going to get that big." Now if you owned that property right there on Charleston and Rainbow...Anyway that was our story there.

Yes, we were constantly connected to Las Vegas. Back then my dad knew—a lot of the work he did back then was for guys who were in the Mafia and all this other stuff. He had stories about these guys. My dad used to say that Las Vegas in those days was actually a safer place because you didn't know who you were messing with and so you didn't mess around with anybody. He goes, "You never would have seen those gangs come in from California to come in and rob. That would have never happened in those days." The old stories...And I got to meet some of those guys. It was pretty cool to help them talk about it.

Do you remember any of the characters you met?

One guy, his job was—I don't remember his name. But even if they were, I don't think they would have told us their real name. But this guy was responsible for three of the properties in terms of all the liquor that they took in. He managed all the liquor that was being...He used to tell me, "If somebody done deliver on what I need, we got ways of dealing with them." I was like, "Okay." It was just classic.

He told me the story about the boxer Sonny Liston. He was a famous boxer in the fifties, in that time, or sixties. I guess one time he got really drunk and was messing up one of the casinos. My dad knew this guy. This was one of the guys that whenever there was trouble, they

would call this guy. Here is Sonny Liston, World Champion boxer and this and that. They called this guy because Sonny Liston is overturning blackjack tables and all this other stuff. They called this guy and my dad was really good friends with him. The guy said, "Yes, I went down there and there is Sonny Liston." As he told the story to us, "I said, 'Mr. Liston, you've got thirty seconds to stop this behavior and exit the property or I'm going to do it for you.'" Liston was all...And literally within thirty seconds he had dropped Sonny Liston on the floor, just dropped him and knocked him out cold, and then they escorted him out of the hotel property. I remember my dad telling us one time that this guy told him, "The work that I do and who I do it for, it pays well. I have a good living. But I always got to be looking over my back."

That was Vegas. That was some of the folks that we worked with. Everything was cash. Everything was cash in those days. When I look back at that history that was really cool. It was a cool experience when I think back about the stories that were shared with me and some of the people that I had met as a kid here.

But then after that we moved to Texas. I loved it because we moved to a small town called Lewisville, Texas. Everybody knew everybody.

Where in Texas is that?

It's outside of Dallas off the 35 going towards Denton, Texas, going towards Oklahoma. You've got Dallas and then you drive on the 35 and you hit Lewisville. There's a big, giant lake out there, Lake Dallas, and a small town on the other side of it and then you hit Denton and then you're in Oklahoma. We got to spend our high school years there and I loved it. I loved it because it was back home. Being from Texas, it was a great place to live, a small high school. You knew everybody. I excelled there in football and baseball. If you were a football player there, you couldn't do anything wrong. I hate to say it, but that's the way it was.

That's Texas.

That's Texas, right. It was 5-A, the top division for football; we were in that division. It was just a great overall experience that we had there. We were there from '80 to '86-87, and then we ended up coming back to California.

We were back in California and at that point I was—my parents had always told me, my mom more so, "You're going to go to college." I had no idea what this college thing was, but, "You're going to go to college." My mom always stuck that in my head. If it hadn't been for football and baseball...It was the reason that I went because after I got done with high school, okay, where do I continue playing? It was college; that was the next step.

So I went to college and I was playing baseball. It was in college playing baseball that I realized at one point that I was not going to be a professional baseball player and that I better get serious about this college thing. But even at that point when I was going to college, I was going to get a college degree and my area of study was political science, I was going to get a college degree and then go right back in the family business of masonry and pool business and all that stuff. I had no idea what I was going to do with a degree.

We were in California. I was finishing up some school there. It was when the water drought hit really bad in California. Here we are in the pool business. My dad had had his first heart attack, and so he had to take a year off. The doctor said, "Your heart attack was caused by your stress. You need to back off." When he backed off, I dropped out of college and my brother and I were running the business, doing all the work. My dad basically took that time off and started studying for his license to open up his own pool company. He did it for the year, passed it, got his license. I remember within weeks of when he got his license, San Bernardino County, the San Diego area, they passed a new ordinance that no new pools could be built for a

six-month period because of the water drought.

My brother and I were pissed. My poor dad was always, "No, things will get better. We just have to wait." I'm going, "Dad, you can't build any pools. How are you going to start a pool company when you can't build any pools?" My brother and I were pissed. We drove to Las Vegas. I said, "We've got to go somewhere where they're building pools."

We drove to Las Vegas. We were here for a weekend and just checking out different pool companies. We walked into Blue Haven Pools and my brother's boss from Texas was now running the pool company here in Las Vegas. He eyes us and was like, "What are you guys doing here?" "We're looking for work." "Weren't you guys in San Diego?" "Yes, but San Diego is dead; there's no work there." He's like, "Man, I need some masons right now." We walked into his office and we walked out with three weeks' worth of work. It was a weekend fact-finding thing.

Was there a housing boom going on here at the time?

There was always a housing boom.

Well, I know it ebbs and flows. But back then...

Up until the recent recession, even in the seventies when things were going bad, Las Vegas was always growing. The Vegas we knew was always growing. If you wanted to work, there was work. Even during the recession here, if you wanted to work, you could find work. You've got to go out of your way to not find work in Las Vegas.

We walked in and we got excited and he got excited and we walked out of his office with three weeks' worth of work. What was a three- or four-day trip turned into a two-week stay. He put us up in a hotel and we went to work. I remember one weekend I drove back with the big truck that we had. I drove back and we packed everything up and we moved to Las Vegas

permanently. That was in 1990 and we ended up staying here.

What neighborhood did you move into in 1990?

I know at one point we were living right there off what would have been old Vegas, off Rancho, in that area; we had a house there at one point. At another point we had a house off...Is it Torrey Pines? Torrey Pines and the Charleston area right up there, right past Jones; we had a house there at one point. When we moved back, we were out on the 95 North; we had an apartment over there for a couple of years until we finally got into houses.

Actually, when I got together with my wife, we bought our first house and we bought it intentionally that my parents could move into the house. We bought the house and they moved into it. It was right there off Ann Road and Decatur, way out there; we bought our first house out there and then we gave it to my parents when we left for graduate school.

But, yes, at that point we were back in Vegas. After a couple of years of working, in '92 my dad came to me and said, "Hey, I still have that dream of you graduating from college because you would be the first one in our family." Like a lot of Latino families. At that point I was done with school. I was working. I was making good money. I had my own place, an apartment, and just doing my thing. My dad went back to work because now he was recovered from his heart attack. I say recovered, but he had never...

I came up to UNLV and walked in. At that point it was a lot easier. I walked into an adviser in political science. I said, "What do I need to do to graduate?" They looked at all my transcripts and everything. They go, "Basically you just need to complete thirty credits here and you'll graduate." I said, "Thirty credits? That's it?" They're like, "Yes."

I went home and told my dad what the deal was. I said, "Look, Dad, I don't want to mess around. I want to be able to go to school full time. That means I'm not going to be able to work.

I'm going to focus on school so I can get it done. The sooner I get it done, the sooner"—again, at that point—"I can go back to work." He said, "Okay, let's do it."

So I did, I went back to school. I was enrolled full time. One night I went to an event. I was hungry. I was sitting outside the old student union then. I was hungry and I saw there was this event going on. I walked in figuring *they've got to have food in there*. I walked in there and there was a student organization mixer or something like that; all these organizations.

My dad that weekend had told me, "I had a dream." And I said, "What's that, Pops?" He said, "You're going to meet the woman you're going to marry at UNLV." I'm like, "Okay."

I walked into this student mixer and I looked at this table and there was woman, young lady. I didn't even look at what the table was. I just kind of made my way over there. Next thing I know she starts talking to me in Spanish. I go, *what?* I looked down and it was a student organization of Latinos. She's talking to me in Spanish and this and that. It turned out to be my wife. We connected and that's a whole other phase. But we connected and all that good stuff and got done and we were there.

I ended up graduating. I ended up graduating from UNLV. But in that last semester I remember we were at a meeting, a student organization meeting. Boy Scouts of America, they sent a person into our meeting. They had a program called Learning for Life. It was basically a life skills program that they had where they would go into the schools and work with kids on basic life skills. They were looking for bilingual volunteers. I thought, *aha, this could be something cool*. I volunteered. The person hired me and I was a bilingual instructor for the Boy Scouts of America from UNLV going into all the at-risk schools to teach the kids life skills. That was my spring semester of when I was going to be graduating.

At that very point the Boy Scouts had kicked off a national initiative for Hispanic

outreach scouting. They had hired somebody before me and this person had just not worked out. Another person said, "Hey, Jose, have you ever thought about a professional career with scouting?" I was like, "No. What does that mean, professional?" I had been a Cub Scout as a kid and I had no idea. I knew my mom was a leader. I had no idea there was a whole professional side to scouting. They said, "Yes, professional scouts, we're the ones who do the fund raising. We're the ones who put all the programs together. We're the ones who start the units and train the volunteers." I was like, "I had no idea." They said, "Well, would you consider it?" I said, "What do I have to do?" They said, "You have to have a degree."

That was the first time in my mind it clicked that, oh, you've got to have a professional degree in order to do this professional work. Then I saw those folks because I was getting to know them. These people are sitting in cubby holes, but they're wearing ties and they're working on a computer. That was the first time I realized what it meant to have a different career path other than with my dad. My dad had always said, "I want you to have a professional job. I don't want you to do what I do." That was the first time that it hit me, what it meant.

They hired me with the stipulation that I would finish my degree. I was hired in February. I went to work for the Boy Scouts of America initiating the Hispanic outreach program for them here in Southern Nevada. I started a program that had zero kids, zero volunteers, and at the time that I left we had over six hundred kids, half of them were gang bangers who had been identified in gangs and I had gotten them to join scouting, and then I had a hundred and five adult volunteers working in the program when I left.

Over what course of time was this?

That was a three-year period. That was a three-year period that we built up the program.

What do you attribute your success to?

As I found out, I was very good at working with at-risk kids and their families and talking to people. Even though the Boy Scout program has some faults, when it comes to gay and lesbian leaders and some of that stuff; it's a very solid program for kids to be involved with. At that point the scouts were—you want to talk about lack of cultural intelligence or what it means to engage in diverse populations, they had no clue.

We identified an area in the middle of Las Vegas where there were ten schools that hadn't seen any professional scouting in ten years just because they wouldn't go in there. Here I come in and I'm working with the schools and they're inviting me in. At that point I'm working with the Clark County School District Gang Unit, a guy by the name of Sergeant Jaime Sanchez who is leave leading the gang unit and him and I are working together. A lot of times they would identify the kids who had just joined gangs, and him and I would go into a classroom. He'd pull out his little black book and he'd call out the kids, *boom, boom, boom*. "I know you guys just got jumped into..." Back then one of the big gangs was San Chucos. He says, "I know you guys just got jumped in. Today you get to make a choice." There he is with his police uniform, his big old gun and his little black book. The kids knew, if you made it into Sergeant Sanchez's black book, you were in trouble; they knew it. He said, "Today you get to make a choice: You can deal with my gang or you can deal with Mr. Melendez' gang."

Then I would introduce myself. Back then the scouting uniform was these tight ass green shorts that you had to wear, not like today where it's baggy really cool looking uniform as I see it, and hiking boots and I had a Smokey the Bear hat; that was my uniform. Here is this big Mexican and the kids would get a kick out of it. Nine times out of ten, the kids would say, "Ugh, yes, we'll join Mr. Melendez' gang." Because they knew.

The first thing we would do is literally within two weeks of them signing up, we would

take them on a camping trip, kids who had never been outside of the inner city and here we are going up to Mount Potosi. We would do that all the time. Again, I did that for three years and half of the six hundred kids that we had signed up had come from the gang side of the program that we had gotten them to join up.

It was an exciting time. I loved doing that job. It was my first exposure to a professional environment, what it meant to have a college degree, what it meant to get to wear a suit or a tie and a white shirt every day, and everything I had read.

My dad used to consider himself a failure. He considered himself a failure because he had given us all this. I said, "Dad—" I remember when we left for Michigan for graduate school, I really appreciated it at that time because we had some of the richest conversations we ever had. I think in his mind for the first time I had grown up and I was doing my own thing; living way off in Michigan, not asking him for any money or any support; my wife and I were doing our own thing. I know he was very proud of me. We used to have some incredible conversations. I remember the one that impacted me the most was when he said, "I know I failed you guys." I said, "Dad, how can you say you failed us?" I said, "I'm off getting a master's degree. When I get that master's degree as a Latino, I think only three percent of us ever complete college and then only one-point-something percent get a master's degree." I said, "My wife as a Latino, she'll be zero-zero-point-something out of Latinas who actually complete a Ph.D." I said, "Do you know what that master's means for me?" He goes, "No. What?" I said, "It means I'll probably have pretty good jobs the rest of my life. I'm not going to have to worry about jobs because I'm bilingual and I'll have a master's degree." "Well, I never looked at it that way." I said, "Yes. Then you have a son who went to law school." My brother was in the first class to graduate from law school here at UNLV. My sister went to law school. She's been an administrator with the school

district for eighteen years now. Then my other brother decided college wasn't for him, but he's the one that went into the family business and has run a very successful—I mean, he's turning work down all the time now. I said, "How can you call yourself a failure, Dad? You took our family and in one generation we went from blue collar to white collar. You always said you didn't want me to follow in your footsteps." I said, "During the summer I sit in air-conditioned offices and I wear a tie every day. Isn't that what you wanted?" So he realized that he had been successful and had given us a life that he was never going to experience.

That set the foundation. My kids are never going to know what it's like to have to do that kind of work. They're both good in school and they love education. My daughter most likely is going to go to the University of Michigan because that's where she wants to go. My son wants to go to Notre Dame. He'll probably have a chance to go to Notre Dame. It's those kinds of experiences that that created for us and that we did.

I did that for three years and then I got recruited to go work in Senator Reid's office. They were looking for somebody to do Hispanic outreach.

The other part of me for college was that was the first time that I learned what it meant to have Latino role models. Up until that point my dad and my mom were my heroes, like a lot of Latinos. But in college it was the first time that I met professional Latinos, the Tom Rodriguezes, the Larry Masons. Those folks at that point were my mentors. That was the first time that I came across Latino male role models and got exposed to that. I also got exposed to students who were volunteering with the Latin Chamber all the time, Otto Merida, and John Mendoza, Eva Mendoza, all those people that we were exposed to as college students. That was the first time I had ever come across professional Latinos wearing suits every day and doing what they did. Larry Mason was the director of admissions here at UNLV when I was admitted. He was the first

person that I talked to about coming to UNLV and he told me what I needed to do and this and that. I said, "So, should I be worried?" He goes, "No, you'll get in." He was the first person that put me on that pathway to where we are today and being exposed to that.

When Senator Reid came looking for somebody to do Hispanic outreach, my name was put at the top of the list. I remember getting a call one day. I was actually working as a recruiter. I had just changed jobs over to College of Southern Nevada working as a recruiter. One day I got a call. "Hi, this is Such-and-such for Senator Harry Reid." I'm like, "Uh-huh." "Yes, we'd like you to come in tomorrow. You're interviewing." I'm like, "Interviewing for what?" They said, "A position with a senator." I'm like, Okay." I went the next day.

You never applied?

I never applied. You don't apply for those kinds of jobs.

Okay, so he found you.

People ask me, "How do you get a job with the senator?" I say, "You don't apply for those jobs. They find you." Those staff members are always handpicked because of the political nature of all the stuff.

I got a call and I went the next day and interviewed with a guy by the name of Renaldo Martinez who was the only Latino chief of staff to a United States Senator at that point. He was in the room and he interviewed me. Next thing I know, two weeks later I'm sitting in the Federal Building working for Senator Harry Reid and I did that for three years.

Describe that job for us.

I was a regional representative. What a regional representative does is basically any time anybody has a problem with a federal agency, that's who you go to, whether it's an immigration issue, whether it's a Department of Justice issue, Department of Education issue; any resident or

citizen that has a problem with a federal agency or that is an issue for a federal agency, the regional representatives are the first ones they talk with; that was part of it. Then there's all the big people who are friends of Senator Reid. For example, one time Senator Reid called me directly, "Jose, I've got to a situation I need you to deal with." I'm like, "Yes, sir. What is it?" One of the princes of some Middle Eastern country was coming in and they're bringing their whole entourage. "They all need visas," and this and that. "They're good clients." I think that was when Wynn still owned the Mirage. Apparently, this prince would come in every other year and he would take up the entire top floor for him and all his entourage. They had some kind of problem with getting visas. The senator called me directly and said, "I need you to get on the phone. Immigration is waiting for your call so we can get this fixed." For the next three days that's all I was doing. We dealt with that stuff and got it done. So people like that who knew the senator, I would have to deal with stuff. My three areas were the Department of Justice, Department of Labor and Department of Education. I dealt with those issues and helped people address whatever their problems were as long as it was a federal issue. Then, of course, there was a lot of outreach and engagements and we did awareness programs and stuff like that that we did for the community on behalf of Senator Reid.

That also exposed me to—Senator Reid has always been a friend to the Latino community, always—any of the national programs that dealt with Hispanic initiatives; I was the person going to all of those things, so Chicago with all the national Hispanic conferences there, Washington, D.C. I was constantly traveling on behalf of the senator to go and attend all these national programs for Hispanic initiatives.

But you officed here.

I was officed here. I was here in Southern Nevada, in Las Vegas. Again, I was a regional

representative. But I got all this exposure to all this stuff and got to meet Henry Cisneros, the governor out of New Mexico—I got to work with all those people—and Luis Gutiérrez from Chicago. I got to work with all those people on behalf of Senator Reid. It was just incredible. If you're a political scientist and here you are doing all this stuff, it doesn't get any better. It doesn't get any better.

To my disbelief, my then girlfriend had come back from Harvard and said, "I want to go off and get a Ph.D." I had no clue what that meant. I knew people who had them. I said, "So what, you'll come back to UNLV and get your Ph.D. here a year from now?" She goes, "No, you don't go to a school like Harvard to come back and do that. I'm going to have an opportunity to go to some really good schools." I was like, "Okay."

She started applying and got accepted to several schools. We actually started off at Michigan State University in East Lansing, but when we got there—I was so pissed. We moved two thousand miles. I give up my job. Senator Reid, I remember when I was getting ready to leave, he goes, "Jose, what do you want to do after you get done with me because you're not going to work with me forever?" I said, "Well, why not?" He goes, "Because I know you. You've got plans." I'm like, "Well, sir, at some point I would like to go off and get a master's degree in something." I finally knew what it meant to get that advanced degree because I had seen my wife go through it. He goes, "All right. Well, you let me know when you're ready to do and we'll see what we can do." I was like, "Okay."

We started off at Michigan State. We picked up, moved two thousand miles. I left my job with Senator Reid. We get there. You know how this is. You go somewhere not because it's a good program, but also there's somebody specifically you're going to want to study with that is going to advise you and all of that. We move. We get there. This is in early 2000. Michigan

especially is still a very, very white state; I think the Latino population in Michigan is like 3.1 percent. Coming from a state where at that point Nevada was 15 percent, you're like, *wow*. You know you're a person of color in Michigan.

There is some culture shock, yes.

Right. And especially where we were at. We were in a town called Okemos, Michigan. Unless you could see the college students, there was not a lot of diversity there. We moved there, two thousand miles away. We moved there and we're there a couple of days. The guy that my wife is going to study with who does student activism—that's his big research area, is student activism—he calls up. "Hey, we're having a dinner tonight. We'd like to invite you guys as part of the new student cohort. We'd like to invite you and your husband to come and join us." We're like, "Oh, that's awesome."

We go that night. We're meeting everybody, the new cohort and the old cohort and all the students that were with him. We find out it's a going away party because he just took a job at UCLA. I stopped in the middle of everybody. I said, "Excuse me." He's like, "Yes?" I said, "You're leaving Michigan State?" He realizes and he's got this big Mexican staring him down. I'm like, "You're leaving Michigan State? We just moved two thousand miles because my wife thought she was studying with you and you're leaving to UCLA?" I said, "You couldn't have said something before we picked up and left everything to move out here to study with you?" My wife was like, *come on*. And I was pissed. I said, "Honey, let's go." We got up and left the dinner. I was so pissed.

Luckily for us, there's a woman by the name of Ann Austin who is a top person in education. She had gotten wind of what had happened and understood, and so she pulled my wife in under her wings and for that year advised her. But at the same time, we had a good friend of

ours who had just started her Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, Edith Fernandez. She should be on your list to interview, but she's the vice president for community engagement and diversity at Nevada State College.

Yes, we got her done a couple of weeks ago.

We're all very tight. She was at the University of Michigan starting her Ph.D. while we were at Michigan State. She goes, "You ought to just apply over here. We've got enough of a network over here that we can get you in." My wife was like, "Okay."

We started the process and then she goes, "Jose, have you ever thought about applying for a master's degree in social work?" I'm like, "In social work? Why would I do that?" She goes, "Because everything you do with at-risk kids and all that stuff, there's a feel in that in social work." I said, "My experiences with social work have always been negative. They are the ones who bring you the paperwork." When my dad was passing, they are the ones who brought us the paperwork and didn't show any empathy whatsoever. "You need to fill this out so we can get you help." I was like, "We don't need my help. We're not asking for any help." They are the ones who go into the homes and break up the families. I had read enough of a history that when the Japanese were interned during World War II, it was social workers who delivered the message. "Hey, you have three days to pack up whatever you can carry because you're being moved." It was social workers who delivered those messages on behalf of the government. So my experience with social workers was nothing but negative, and here is a good friend of mine who I highly respect saying, "You ought to look at the field of social work; that's where you..."

I was like, "All right, I'll check it out." So I did, I went and checked it out. It turned out, yes, they had a whole youth component. They had a social systems component; things that I had been working in, but didn't know what it was called and here they were putting language to it and

theory to it and all this other stuff. I applied and, lo and behold, we were both admitted, her in the Ph.D. program and me into what was at that point the number-one program in the country and it still is twenty-seven years later, it's still the number-one program for social work, and got admitted. I had no clue because my GPA at UNLV when I graduated was like a two-point-four. I said, "How are you going to take a two-point-four and let them into the top...?" The person there said, "Well, because we're Michigan and we know there's more to a person than just a grade." I was like, *wow*.

Here my wife had been denied admissions to the UNLV business school. I hadn't applied, but I had been told that with my GPA I wouldn't get into at that point the urban affairs master's program. "No, your GPA, you won't get in. And your test scores, you just won't get in here." Here was the University of Michigan saying, "Oh, well, we don't think that grades make a person. We look at the bigger picture of stuff."

We were both admitted and started off. I'm grateful every day for the experience that I had at the University of Michigan. Actually, I donate and I'm part of the Alumni Association with the University of Michigan where I'm not here at UNLV because I think UNLV still has a long ways to go before they really accept diversity on this campus and what it truly means to be a diverse campus. Right now it's still a lot of talk and we still have a lot of work to do. I do not contribute to the UNLV Alumni Association here.

Can you touch a little bit more on that idea of UNLV having to...

Well, it's a lot of work. I've been here thirteen years now and I have served under eight different presidents. Every time a new president comes in, everything we do in diversity—which is why I'm glad I'm not in diversity work anymore—everything we do in diversity is very much impacted by whatever the leadership because if you don't have buy-in from leadership that stuff

does not work. It's got to be top down. Every time a new president comes in, hold the press, now we're going to have a new vision of what they see diversity is. In those thirteen years, I had served under four different vice presidents for diversity and inclusion, or now it's diversity and inclusion. Just the dynamics of it. I think in my experience the presidents who were committed to diversity, they were pushed out of their jobs pretty quickly. Here we are a Title III Institution, AANAPISI, which is Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution under Title III, which we have been for now eight years, and then here recently for the last three years we are now a Hispanic-Serving Institution, but we still have a lot of white faculty tenured who when I was in diversity basically told me to my face, "You know what, Jose? I hear you and I get it, but I'm not going to change how I teach. I'm not going to change how I interact. They have to change to me." What that does is set it up for where students of color get pushed out of our university. This university has identified those classes where students get pushed out because you can see the failure rate in those classes.

This whole talk about the first-year experience, second-year, that's all a direct result of understanding that we are serving a diverse population and it's only going to get more and more diverse. UNLV will never go backwards in terms of that there will be a white dominant student base. It's never going to go there again. Black, Latino, you look at our Asian populations, they're only going to continue to grow. My wife said the other night when we were talking about it, in her graduate classes she teaches, the majority of the students are Filipino. That's who we are. All the literature tells you we are very much in historical pathway of being a white dominant based institution transitioning to a minority serving institution and all the literature tells you. All these people try to make the case, "Well, when you have that kind of diversity, you just can't expect to become a top research institution." The Michigans and the Ohio States and all these top

universities will tell you, "The richness of diversity is what makes us a top research institution." When people try to say that here in Nevada, it's like, *augh, no*. When all the research says, yes, you might get this diverse population. The thing with institutions like ours is you have to meet the students where they are and then provide them with the skills and the resources that they're going to need to become part of contributing to the top research initiatives that we have and that's the pathway. Until you start talking about—what started getting people's attention around here was when I would say, "Well, there are over 55 million dollars' worth of potential federal grants just for Hispanic-serving institutions." That's when people started, "Oh, I didn't know that." It's just the wave. Three years ago I was on a phone call for HSI initiatives at the federal government and at that point on that call the person who was leading the call announced, "There are over two hundred institutions right now on this call who are all in the next year going to achieve designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution." That's the entire Southwest; Florida, Texas, California, New Mexico, Nevada where four of our institutions now are Hispanic-serving institutions. At some point we all will be; everybody in Nevada will be a Hispanic-serving institution. Unfortunately, either they die off or they retire and leave until we start to change the faculty mind-set on this campus about embracing what it means to be a minority serving institution. That's where still a lot of the challenges lie with Marta Meana as our president right now. You look at Nevada now where three of the college presidents are Latinos. The superintendent for the school district is Latino. That's just the wave. Unfortunately, there's still the dynamics of black community fighting with the Latino community over all the peanuts and then here is one slice of pie and then here is the big slice of pie, which is still under control by the majority of white folks who hold the political power in this state. Those are some of the dynamics that we deal with.

Again, three years ago, because of the politics on this campus, I was pushed out of the diversity office, which I hated to go, but I accepted it because I'm tired of fighting these fights. People tell me all the time, "You were always so angry." I say, "It wasn't that I was angry, but the thing is if you're doing—" Like Chris Clark used to say all the time—are you familiar with Chris Clark? She was the first vice president. Although I didn't agree with her methods, I think she was right on the mark. She said, "Jose, you know the problem with diversity work?" I said, "What's that Chris?" She said, "If we're doing our jobs right"—I'm like, "Yes"—"ultimately you're pissing somebody off. How many times do you go to somebody, 'That comment you just made was racist,' or, 'That micro aggression that you just played out in your classroom...' Ultimately if we're doing our job right, it's because you're calling somebody out. When you start doing this kind of training, when you start doing this kind of diversity and what now Dr. Oaks calls cultural intelligence, the problem with all of that is when somebody steps into that room and they say, 'Okay, I'm here to figure out how I serve these diverse departments,' well, there's six stages that an individual goes through. Guess what the first stage is? Acknowledging that I'm a racist or acknowledging that I have some kind of thing..." For me, as a Latino, people say, "Well, you can't be racist." I say, "Sure as hell I can be racist. When I put on my Chicano hat, when I call myself a Chicano, that's a political statement and I'm acknowledging that I don't get a damn about you being white or you being black. All I care about is my Chicano issues." And I know when to do it. I've learned enough that I know when I can claim and who I'm in front of. When they ask me, "How do you define yourself?" "Well, I define myself as Chicano." They kind of step back because if they have any kind of political sense, they understand what I'm saying to them. We can find a pathway to work things out, or if you want to fight, let's go because I can bring everybody to the table and let's have a fight. I've learned enough.

The thing for me where I think my life changed in diversity—I was not trained to be in diversity work. I was a political scientist loving what I did with Senator Reid and all the politics of the United States and all that. I'm a big history buff when it comes to reading political, the Kennedy family and all the stuff that's happened in the history of our United States with politics. But when I went to Michigan, I was exposed to what real diversity is. I remember we had just gotten back from Michigan. I do a lot of public speaking at school events and programs and things like that. I got called out. Then Councilman (Lawrence) Weekly, now Commissioner Weekly, used to do this Latino Youth Leadership Conference that he does in West Las Vegas. For about four or five years I spoke at that. A bunch of the kid who came to that were from the Andre Agassi School. I remember sitting there talking to a group of kids and this young black girl, I think she was a seventh grader, she finally raises her hand. "Mr. Melendrez?" I'm like, "Yes?" She goes, "So I hear what you're saying. I hear what you're saying. But you went off to this fancy school, got an education, got your master's degree finally." I said, "Yes." She goes, "So what did you really learn?" I'm like, "What do you mean, what did I really learn?" She goes, "What did you really learn?" I was like, *okay, she's not speaking about the actual degree that I earned*. I said, "Okay, I hear you. I guess what I learned is that when I left Las Vegas in 2000, if you had known me back then, it was all about Latinos. I didn't worry about white issues. I didn't worry about black issues." Because back then that's all it was. There was no other issues. Black, Latino, white. I said, "But when I went to Michigan, in the seven years that I spent there, when I was or when I used to be Latino, now I self-identify as a person of color." She just sat back and looked at me like...There is so much for us to learn in terms of civil rights and the struggles in this country. There is so much to learn from our Native-American population; there is so much to learn from our black population because they've been fighting with it for a long time, not that

Latinos haven't. We've been in the fight as long as they have. It's only recently that we've been able to find our voice to tell those stories.

Right now on Netflix—we just watched it the other night, my wife and I. We were just cracking up, but it's so true. John Leguizamo, the comedian, has this special on Netflix right now where he documents the entire Latino experience going back to the Incas and the (Tepajuanos) and all these populations that basically when Columbus came through and all these indigenous Latino populations who disappeared because of what Columbus did, completely disappeared off the face of the Earth, which now as he calls it, why we are Latino is because of the bastardization of the Spanish needing to have sex with the indigenous people, which then became what we know today as Latinos. That's how we are today. Watch it. It is incredible.

I will. That seems very important for us to all share.

You want to talk about having a video? He documents the entire experience. He presents it in a way that he was trying to help his son in a school project trying to find Latino heroes. It's an incredible piece done, the way he presents it with comedy, but he hits you at your core. We just watched it the other night. I was like, *oh, man*.

Anyway, my experience, like I said, now I self-identify as a person of color, and all my mentors, the Larry Masons, go, "What the hell are you talking about? You're Chicano; you're this; you're that." I'm like, "No, I'm a person of color." We get into these philosophical conversations about what that means. I said, "You know what?"

I'll give you an example now, especially now, because I'm so grateful for what I do now in public health. When my dad died and my mom was forced to deal with his passing—he passed away in 2003. He wouldn't come to my graduation because he wouldn't fly and it was too far to drive. I graduated in 2003 with my master's degree from University of Michigan. That was in

May. June tenth of that year my dad passed away from complications of his diabetes. He went in for an angioplasty procedure, which was pretty common back then. As they were going through the process and the procedure and whatever medication they were using, his organs started shutting down. I get a call that afternoon that, "Hey, Dad's dying." I'm like, "What?" I had just talked to him the night before. I was like, "Dad, do I need to come in?" He was like, "No, no, this is just a normal procedure. I'll be fine." Well, it turns out from the first time he had his first heart attack at forty-eight—we didn't know—he had never seen a heart doctor again. For him being in construction, the only time he could see a doctor was if he had the cash. There was never any follow-up with a heart doctor or something that he should have been doing to continue monitoring your heart. He never did that. At fifty-nine he passed away from complications from his diabetes because he was a full-on diabetic. He went in for this angioplasty to clear out his veins and his organs started shutting down and he died.

Lo and behold—it's funny how God works—at the end of that summer I was working for an agency in Detroit that hired me and my dad passed and at that time I just lost it and went into my own world trying to figure out what I was going to do. At that point the University of Michigan School of Social Work, School of Nursing, Medical School and Public Health School—are you familiar with the REACH program from the CDC? It's a funded grant program called Racial and Ethical Approaches to Community Health and it's a funded program through the CDC. Every couple of years they'll release funding and applications for people to become a REACH site. The University of Michigan was a REACH site. One of the big areas was using community health workers to address diabetes, healthy pregnancy; all this stuff. At that point they had nobody on that staff, the entire team; they didn't have a single staff member that was bilingual. One of my faculty, who became now a friend and colleague, he reaches out to me. He

knew we were still in town because my wife was finishing. He goes, "Jose, do you have a job?" I'm like, "Yes, I'm working for this nonprofit in Detroit." He goes, "Well, have you ever thought about doing something different?" I'm like, "What?" He's like, "Well, we've got this healthy lifestyles project and we're a REACH-funded site, but we've got nobody that's bilingual." I'm like, "What do you mean?" He goes, "Nobody on our staff, none of the faculty, none of the current students. Would you be interested?"

They hired me. I left the other job and went to work for them. I went from just managing students—I was managing all the post docs, the Ph.Ds. and all the undergrads. We had about forty students who had different things working. There were eight faculty members, two from each college that I mentioned, and they all had students. I was managing all of the students for the project, all their work, all the stuff working with the faculty. "Okay, I need these students to do this and I need them to do this." I was running focus groups. I was doing qualitative research. I was running one-on-one interviews, teaching all the students how to do all this stuff. Any focus groups, any of the collecting data, I was responsible for that; managing all the students who did all that work.

They hired me and I went from the student coordinator for all the programs. I ended up four years working for them where I ended up managing the entire project, three-point-five- million-dollar grant from the CDC, managing the entire project for the School of Social Work. It was an incredible experience. Again, that was my introduction from the field of social work into public health, which is why it's so exciting now with what I'm doing here because I ran that whole gamut of doing diversity work with all the political fights and all the struggles.

It was tiring. People would see me and they would be like, "Jose, you were always so

angry and now we see you and you're so happy." I said, "Well, yes, I'm not fighting the political fight. I'm not fighting the political fight of constantly struggling with people about diversity." I said, "I'm still doing the work." My dean called me this past summer when I was on vacation. Shawn [Gerstenenberger] calls me and says, "Hey, listen, I need to ask you for a big favor." I'm like, "What's that?" One of the areas that we had taken some dings on was that we did not have—we had diversity represented faculty, students, but we didn't have a diversity plan in place for our college. He goes, "I hate to ask this. I know that was something you were trying to get away with, but I can't think of anybody better. We need to implement a diversity strategy for our college." He said, "It's one of the things that we got dinged on and I can't think of anybody else better to develop it and run it for our college." So I was like, "Okay, I'll do it."

But it's a different work within the college versus the entire campus. I took it on and we're doing that right now. We have our first meeting on December 14th, I think is our first meeting. I think I've got fifteen people, faculty and staff and students who are all going to be part of that committee. Yes, to be able to get back to where I started in public health as a social worker was exciting. Just so many good things are happening for the college right now and I'm a part of that effort. It's a good place. Now when people see me, they're like, "You look so happy." I'm like, "I'm in a good place. What can I say?"

You are happy.

I'm not having to fight everybody. It's good. I think we've made peace with the people who were constantly some of our folks who were always digging at us for the diversity stuff and all that.

Honestly, I think as an institution UNLV is going in a good direction. I just hope we can figure out this presidency thing and break up the regents so that we can get rid of that form of government because it does not work for us and it continues to hurt us, and UNLV is a prime

example of that because we constantly lose presidents because of the regents butting in where they shouldn't be butting in.

Something wrong with the picture, yes.

My wife wrote a couple of the policy briefs on what the system could look like if we didn't have regents. At one point we were both attacked. There was a year there where my wife and folks on the regents were saying that we should be fired for our insubordination. Luckily, my wife had somebody who backed her up and my vice president at the time backed me up. "No, I'm not going to fire them. They're doing their job." We were fortunate in that sense.

I think politics here in Nevada, because of who I am and the network that I have to the highest levels of Latino leadership in the state of Nevada, I'm not afraid to pick a fight with anybody. If we need to, we can pick a fight and we can bring the whole Latin Chamber and everything that we have going on for us right now, we can bring it to the table. When they eliminated my position in diversity, we were there and at that time we had just backed up the new president for him to be hired. Right after that they eliminated my position. The chamber leadership got a meeting with the president and said, "We backed you up and the first thing you do is approve that one of our directors lose their job?" He was like, "No, no, no, no, Jose is going to be fine. He's got a year. We're going to find something for him."

Eight months went by and I just sat in an office and just read and researched. Then finally at one point they came to me and said, "Why don't you write up a position for what you'd like to do?" I was like, typical UNLV, "Okay." After eight months I was like, "Okay."

I wrote it up and I wrote up what I was doing in Michigan, a community engagement position; that's how I presented it. It could be done in any college. At one point I had the College of Education, College of Urban Affairs. And then Shawn got a hold of it. "Jose, I know you have

a background in public health. If you could come work for me and do this job, you would turn me loose to be able to do my job as dean and not have to do all this other stuff." I'm like, "Let's do it."

Two weeks after he had read my proposal, he said, "Let's do it," and I was hired into the school. It was funny because at that point what they thought they were doing—it's okay. I don't care now. People can hear me now. I don't hide that fact.

When we wrote up the proposal and it was accepted and we did this, at some point somebody thought they were smart and they had released myself, the other associate vice president from our area. Here in the diversity office at that time for the first time in the history of this office, you had a black woman, a Latino male and a Native American working in that office, the most diversity you had ever seen, and being led by a white woman at one point, being led by a black person at one time, and then at that point when they did what they did to us, a Latino vice president. We know agreements have been made and certain people have been given their permanent positions. It's fine. But they really felt that they were going to be able to do something with how we were financed and they were going to take that money and get rid of our top-level positions and hire four lower level program coordinator positions. We're like, "Everything you're saying you're going to do, we've already done it and we already have it in place and you're getting rid of us so you can bring in four people who don't know anybody and try and rebuild these relationships?" I think at one point the then finance person said, "No, you guys can't do that."

Whenever that happens that they eliminate a position, you have a right to ask for a letter of explanation. I asked for the letter and the reasons they gave me was, "One, we need somebody who has networks and connections into the Latino population." I would challenge anybody on

this campus. There is maybe one or two Latino faculty members who might have the excessive network that I have. "Two, we want somebody who has student programming." I'm like, *okay, I was hired in and brought in and I created and set up the Office of Student Diversity Programming and Services, running all the multicultural programming for three years on this campus. I don't know student programming?* Then the third part was, "That had intimate relationships with faculty and folks on campus." At that point I had established the Minority Serving Institution Council. We had the Diversity Council. I was in partnerships with all kinds of faculty doing different things. We were bringing in funding. We were doing all this. I said, "Program level coordinator position and what you're telling me why my position was eliminating with all of these three things you identified, I have in place."

When I took it to my attorney, they were like, "Yes, if you were to pursue this, it wouldn't look good for UNLV." At that point I had the person who was supposed to be the middle of the road person all the time, ombudsman. He looked at it and said, "Well, there's not much you can do, but I can tell you if you were to pursue this issue, there's probably a couple of attorneys that would gladly take it."

I went to the president and my VP and I said, "Look, I'm going to put faith that you guys are going to do right by this situation because I've already talked to an attorney. I've already spoken to other people. They're aware of the situation. And if I was to pursue legal action, this would not look good for UNLV." I said, "On top of then the whole Latino issue because here we are finally getting somewhere in terms of advancement of leadership on this campus and the direction that we're going and you guys are telling us that you going to revamp the entire diversity office when you finally had what it should look like?"

So they all backed off. Again, eight months later I was asked to write up my position and

I did and it was taken. I've now been here for three years. But that's the politics of UNLV. I don't hold any grudges. I've made my peace with everybody and we're in good places, doing good things, and UNLV is going in a good direction. I just hope that when they do find a new president that that individual has the backing and the support they're going to need to continue moving UNLV forward.

Amen. For sure.

I was wondering if you could touch more on your recent activity with the community outside of UNLV that you've been involved with.

A big part of it is for work because our students are required to have an internship program that they have to complete both as an undergrad and a graduate, master level student. I do a lot of work in the community identifying community partners, internship sites; those kinds of things. Then with the two research centers that we have, Center on Health Disparities and the Center for American Indian Research and Education, I help support those efforts, and so there's a lot of community work with that.

Four years ago right before I came to work for now the School of Public Health—that sounds really great—I'm not the only one, but I think one of the few folks in Nevada that is actually trained and has done community based participatory research and community based participatory action research. A colleague of mine in Northern Nevada—there was a big struggle in diversity issues. The Office of Minority Health had existed at the state level under Department of Health and Human Services. The office existed on paper and it had some funding from grants, but the office wasn't doing any work. They were getting funding for the federal government for the Office of Minority Health and they would take that money and then they would put it everywhere else but minority health issues. At that point, three sessions ago is where we really

took hold for the first time in terms of a black caucus and a Latino caucus at the state legislature, and some of those folks started asking questions. "We know that this office exists, but we don't see anything happening. What's going on?" They started calling out the governor's office, they started calling out the appointed officials who ran those offices, and nobody had a response. Typical Nevada in state of Nevada fashion, they said, "Well, let's do a research initiative on it and find out what the problem is. Do we need an Office of Minority Health?" That was their question. They subcontracted a person up north. Again, they subcontracted a person up north knowing that all of the work had to be in Southern Nevada because that's where the diversity is.

This person reached out to me and said, "Hey, my company has been contacted to do this research. Would you be interested in doing some work for us in Southern Nevada?" I'm like, "Sure." I couldn't believe the amount of money they paid me to do this, but I said, "Sure, let's do it." I did it. I completed almost fifty one-on-one interviews. We did what we call five "convenings" of folks where there was at least thirty to fifty people in each one of those "convenings" to ask the question, "Is an Office of Minority Health needed?" The answer by everybody was unanimously to the person, "Yes, an Office of Minority Health is needed." We wrote up the report, presented it to the State of Nevada, and they said, "Okay, let's do this."

Then, like I said that was a year after that point I was hired by Shawn into the School of Public Health. That was one of the areas that Shawn was looking at. He always had a commitment to minority health initiatives. I shared with him what we were doing, and he loved it. He said, "Yes, let's make it one of your areas. Let's continue to work with them."

When the state rebounded, new legislation was put in place and established the new Office of Minority Health and Equity, equity being to be more open because when you say just the word *minority*, most people will gather around that looking at just race and ethnicity, and if

you're lucky it might include gender. By throwing the word *equity* in there, then you really opened it up to LGBTQ, race, religion, ageism, veteran status, you name what I like to say the big D, big diversity. *Equity* was that new word that was put in place. Along with that, the state reestablished the office, took it from soft funding to hard funding so that nobody could touch the money again, and then also they asked, "Jose, would you be able to help us establish a community component to it?" I was like, "Well, what do you mean community component?" "A coalition so that there would be a community voice so that in the future that community voice could work with us around resources, grants, things like that to help support the office and the work of that office, but then also at the same time"—and my hats off, I give credit to the DHHS for this—"but then at the same time, when we're not doing what we should be doing, hold us accountable." I was like, "Okay." They asked me to help build a coalition.

We dove into it. Again, because I had the support of my dean, he made that a fourth area for me. He said, "Yes, go for it." We established what is now the Nevada Minority Health and Equity Coalition, which is now a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. We're incorporated in Nevada. We've got some funding coming in from the State of Nevada. We're going after some other grants. We're working on a new leadership seminar that's going to allow people to earn a certificate in public health in minority and equity issues. There's just a lot of things. We just held our first Impact Summit that was fully attended and sold out, over a hundred and fifty people at the Impact Summit. Just a bunch of stuff happening around minority health and equity in Nevada. I helped to create that, coordinate it, bring people together and build that and now we fully function with the DHHS with their Office of Minority Health and Equity and we coordinate things and do things and a lot of good stuff is happening around that that we're a part of.

Again, right now, for Shawn's case, here at School of Public Health, it is right in

alignment with everything that we do for reaching out. Now when you look at UNLV big picture, the whole Council on Community Engagement and all these other things that we're doing and everything we're doing with that aligns right with where UNLV is going. I've been fortunate, again, to be part of those efforts. That's my job. That's my role with the community, engaging.

Then, of course, I serve as director with the Latin Chamber of Commerce. I'm appointed by Governor Sandoval as a voting member to Nevada Health Link, which is Obamacare. I serve as a voting member of that commission. I'm appointed by the City Council of Las Vegas; I serve as a trustee to the Las Vegas Clark County Library District, which is one of the best funded and best operating library systems in the country. We're always held as one of the top. I think I'm in my third year as a trustee to the library.

Then the stuff that I really love to do, again, I'm a manager with Little League. My son is in Boy Scouts. I serve as a den leader for our Cub Scout pack, assistant cub master, and we're about to go into Boy Scouts. We just completed our thing and my son is about to join Boy Scouts. I'm excited about that because, as you all know, Boy Scouts recently changed their whole dynamics and so now gay and lesbian leaders are allowed and kids aren't kicked out of Boy Scouts anymore because they're gay.

Again, for me in Nevada, there's a lot of really cool and exciting things happening in Nevada that as a state we're going in a good direction. And the fact that on the political side that we're blue again, big-time blue, I just love living here. I love living here and after twenty years we finally got a Democrat elected to the governor's office. I think except for the secretary of state seat, everything else went blue, because Barbara Cegavske won her seat, kept her seat, but everything else I think is blue. I'm proud to be a Nevadan and be in one of the few blue states. I

think it's going to show even more so. Again, the next presidential election, I think we'll stay blue in a bigger way. Whether Trump wins on the national scale or not, he's not going to win Nevada, and so I'm excited about that.

I wanted to ask you, what are some of the public health issues in Nevada that minority groups are facing?

Well, you still have the issues of access. With Nevada Health Link, for example, you have more Latinos and Latino youth now covered with insurance than you've ever had in the history of the state of Nevada, but percentage-wise and numbers-wise, we still have a long way to go. Access, health coverage, you have such a diversity of languages. I think in the school last time, there's over a hundred different languages spoken in the school district. When you look at the Asian Pacific Islander community, multiple, multiple languages spoken, and you don't have a lot of doctors that speak those languages, and so access, linguistics, language, coverage. How do you pay for those services? Even with the Latino community being as big as it is, right now that I'm aware of I think there are maybe three Spanish-speaking doctors who provide their services in Spanish. There might be more, but that I'm aware of in the network that I work with, I know of three.

Even if it's more than that, that's not very many.

No, it's not when you look at the population. Almost thirty percent of the population of Nevada is Latino. We're still a hub. More people are coming here. You can go into East Las Vegas and you can live your entire world only doing everything in Spanish. You don't have to learn to speak English here. It's the same thing with some of the Asian cultures. In the work that we do for the Minority Health Coalition is the Asian Community Development Council. Just in the populations that they serve, there are twenty-seven different languages spoken and dialects that they serve

just in the Asian population. Those challenges still exist.

Then the cultural competence component, the whole thing of how those people are served when they do get in...I did a focus group with a group of Spanish-speaking mothers who all of their children have different levels of autism. They're talking to me about how their kids have been beaten in schools by special ed teachers, have been slapped, have been hit, or how one person with the type of autism that their child has, there is no doctor in Nevada that can treat them. There's a doctor that comes in from Utah, every so often comes in and they have to get an appointment with him to see that doctor but they're waiting, or they have to go to California. If it's an emergency, they have to drive to California to have their child serviced and dealt with it when it comes to that. You throw in the language barrier on top of that.

My sister-in-law runs a nonprofit serving those types of families with high mental, emotional challenges, physical challenges. At one point the Catholic Church here would not allow any of those kids to do any of their religious...first communion. What's when you're a senior in high school or junior in high school? I'm forgetting what that is. But they wouldn't allow them to participate in those because they said, "No, mentally they don't understand what they're doing, so we're not going to let them go through it." My sister went toe to toe with the Catholic Church here about letting those kids do their religious...Those types of things.

When it comes to public health, even though the situation has gotten better for some families if they have the means or they have the resources, those challenges are still unfortunately well and alive. How we not only educate the masses on what their rights are, but then how we educate the healthcare providers, the professionals, on how to serve those populations, and that's where the biggest challenge lies. Then you throw in there the undocumented or immigration issues that are happening right now with what Trump has done to

basically allow that language to come to the forefront. Now if people are undocumented, they won't go for anything because the fear of being identified, targeted and then being deported. You've got a lot of undocumented families right now that won't even seek out services. Trump has made that very public and brought it to the forefront. At least in the sixties and seventies and sixties and even the nineties and even into the first decade of the 2000s, people might not like you because of the color of your skin and who you are, but you weren't going to know about it. Now people can straight up, "I don't like your type and I'm not going to serve you," going back to what it was in the sixties or something in the South. It's scary to think that we're at that point right now where somebody can just blatantly...

It is scary.

I don't like Latinos; I don't like blacks; I don't like Asians, and I can say it. They get away with it now. The Civil Rights Act from 1965 was recently up for renewal and there was actually talk in the United States Congress that there was a possibility that it could not be renewed. Think about what that would mean for the Civil Rights Act to be done away with. That's our world right now.

I don't consider myself a political activist, but I know that I'm a voice and that I have resources to take on some of the conversations. I won't say arguments or fights, but to take on some of those conversations. If you're familiar with Chicana feminism, it's a very hardcore approach to how we engage our work, how we engage the things that we might take on. One of the Chicana feminists, Gloria Anzaldua who was huge in that area, she's famous for her work *This Bridge Called My Back*. She would talk about "it's not my responsibility to educate the masses; it's your responsibility to educate yourself about how you work with my people." I respect that. I honor that. But I also know that as a Latino with a master's degree, I'm in a place of privilege, and so I do see myself as having a responsibility to speak up when things need to be

said or to be involved in conversations and things that need to be had when people are not being treated fairly or equally.

Your keyword there is* conversation*. People don't understand what conversation always means.

Yes. What I've learned—and this is something that I'm at odds with a lot of folks on this campus—is that the thing is somebody doesn't have to agree with me and they don't have to like what I'm saying and I don't have to like what they're saying, but at the end of the day here at UNLV we want to put forward the best education we can for our students. One of the objectives of us becoming a top-tier research institution is that we're graduating topnotch educated students. It does us no good to graduate a student and then they go into the work world and our work partners are telling us, "Yes, we hired these students and they can't write a paragraph to save their life." Or, "The quality of an engineer that we're getting from you guys"—which, thank God, we have a good engineering school—"is not..." Or the corporations won't come into Nevada because they don't feel our workforce is educated enough. How many corporation deals have we lost? People jump all over Governor Sandoval because he gave away all these perks to these companies, but how else were they going to come in? He said, "Yes, I'm going to weigh this side and I'm going to give them perks, tax breaks, because they're going to create a thousand jobs," versus letting them go to California or somewhere else. So I get it. I understand that part.

Again, I call it privilege. Not everybody has the privilege to be able to do what we do for a living as educators in higher ed and be able to sit here and ponder, what happens with this or that? That I can sit here and ponder, how do we create a more just and equitable world when it comes to public health in Nevada? It's a great job. Yes, obviously there are times when it's frustrating.

But at the same time it sounds like you find opportunity to stay connected with the people you want to.

Again, what I've learned in my time in Nevada as a professional is that it's real easy to pick the fights. It's real easy. If I don't like you and I can say something, *boom*, great, but then we're not going to get anywhere. We have to find ways of saying, *okay, you're here and I'm here; we don't see eye to eye. But at the end of the day we want to get to the same place. Where do we find that common ground?* I think that's what I run through diversity work here on campus, through our fights that we've had in the community with different issues. I think that's where I've been successful because I think I am able to cross the lines when they need to be crossed to find that common ground for how we move things forward. I may not like it. It may not be what I thought it was going to be at the end of the day, but it gets us that much closer. I believe at the end of the day when we present the facts and we move these things forward, both sides get it. That's where I was supportive as a Democrat. I was very supportive of Governor Sandoval as a Republican and I voted for him because at the end of the day—I think it cost him some political points early on—but at the end of the day, he didn't do stuff because he was a Republican governor. He did stuff because it was the right thing for people in Nevada and I will always respect that.

Again, we're in a place that we have the opportunity to be involved in those worlds, to engage in those kinds of conversations, in that kind of politics. I know that the role that I have here at UNLV in my position within the School of Sciences or Public Health now that it allows me to engage in those community things. The dean asked me for one thing. He goes, "Look, Jose, I know you're politically engaged and all this. But if we're going to get in trouble, just let me know." I'm like, "You got it. If I'm going to pick a fight, I will let you know why." He goes, "I'll back you up on most things, but you've got to keep me in the loop." I'm like, "Okay."

That seems fair enough.

That's the deal that Shawn and I made that if there's going to be a fight, let him know so that he can back me up and be able to...Again, I've been fortunate. Right now where I'm at I don't go around picking a lot of fights. I put things on the table, I'll say things, and I'll send information to folks, and then they can determine what they do with it.

In your eyes what does the future hold for the Latino community here in Nevada?

Again, I think we're in a good place. In 2012, 2013, the Excellence in Education, which is a national thing tank in Washington, D.C. on Latino issues, they looked at a bunch of states. In Nevada in 2012, I think it was, Latino students are actually going to college at the same rate as white students. We're getting them into college. Those efforts have paid off in terms of getting Latino students into college. The challenge we have is that when you look at our graduation rates. Here is white students and then here's Latino students.

Retention.

Retention, keeping them in school. The average white student might be graduating in the five-year mark. The average Latino student might be graduating at the six- or seven-year mark, if we get them to graduation. That's where the inequity still lasts. Now that we are a Hispanic-serving institution, the fact that I know there are still faculty on this campus who will not make the adjustment that they need to make to ensure that students are successful. *They adjust to me; I don't adjust to them*, is their attitude and the only person that hurts is those students.

But with that being said, again, there's a lot of good things happening in Nevada. Politically we're in a good place. They are opportunities. There are more Latino students getting educations. The higher the level of education, the more opportunities they're going to have. Does

that always translate to equity in the workplace? No. But the more education they have, the more they can make those—just like I tell students all the time, the thing is Nevada education is important; it's critical. But the way Nevada operates, who you know is just as critical. If somebody is going to open the door for you and use some other political capital, human capital to get you into a job, you better have the skill sets to be successful in that job.

I get students coming to me all the time, young professionals coming to me all the time, people who are thinking about running for political office, whatever, they come and talk to me. I guess I'm in a place now where I'm one of those people that if they're going to run for political office, I get sought out for my advice. I tell them, "One thing I can tell you is you've got to have the knowledge base, the foundation to be successful because if I'm going to write you a letter of recommendation or if I'm going to make a call or whatever, don't prove me wrong." That's one of the message I give to young people all the time is that you've got to do your part of it and you've got to understand how politics works in Nevada and especially for people of color. It is who you know. That is going to help. That has to be a part of your networking. It has to be a part of your process. That's the thing that kills me right now about millennials is that it's such a way of thinking, *it's just about me, nobody else; I'm going to do my thing.* Okay, but Nevada...In my world Nevada is still a place where what you know is important, but who you know is just as important, if not maybe even more important.

This whole project is a part of it. You're interviewing folks and they tell you, "Have you talked to this person? Have you talked to that person?" That's where you start getting the richness of what's happening with the Latino community in Nevada.

Those are my thoughts. We're in a good place. I think Nevada is in a place where we've got a lot of good things happening, but I'm not naive to say there aren't still challenges. There are

still a lot of challenges and there's still a lot that we have to work through and overcome, but I think there's more opportunities right now for those things to happen. You've just got to have the right foundation and the right mind-set to move forward. You can't get pissed off all the time and you can't get angry all the time; that won't get you anywhere. You've got to see where those opportunities are and you've got to be prepared to work for them. You've got to earn it. You've still got to earn it, I don't care what color you are; purple, gray, whatever. Everybody's still got to work hard and pay your dues. I get these students who are graduate students, and they want to complain about this or that. I'm like, "You know what?" I said, "We've all been there as graduate students. Yes, you're a person of color and there might be some other elements playing out, but you've still got to do the work. You've still got to pay your dues. It's not going to be given to you because you're complaining about it. Accept the reality of what it is and get to work."

I like all those movies, the recent versions of *Ocean's Eleven* and *Ocean's Twelve* and all that because here they are trying to mastermind these big crimes and stuff that they're going to do and all this crazy stuff is happening around them and they're just kind of like taking it. The one, I forget which version it is, but they're doing in Mexico and they are trying to just get a couple of dice that they're going to fix so that when they play the game...But there is a boycott happening at this factory in Mexico and so they're calling back and reporting to Brad Pitt, "Well, right now we're fighting against the administration here." They're all, "Well, there's a boycott going on right now at the factory, so there might be a little delay there." They're all just taking this like, *well, okay*. They're all just like, *well, that's part of life*, and they're moving forward.

Yes, you just adjust.

Yes, you just adjust. Like I said, racism is well and alive and the inequities are still there by the numbers. All that stuff still exists. It's how we choose to interact with those challenges and how

we choose to maneuver through those challenges and at the end of the day how we choose to...Where I hold myself—I can't speak for anybody else—where I hold myself accountable and did I do everything I could that day to address those issues? If you don't know how to do that as a person of color, as a Chicano, as a Latino, as a whatever—I can get very angry and I can get very frustrated and then I can end up in some bad places and I choose not to do that. I choose not to allow that part of it to take over my life because I know what it's like to be an angry brown man having watched how my dad was treated sometimes and what happened to my mom and all those things. But because of their sacrifices, I sit in a desk every day and when I choose to I wear a tie and suit when I want to or I choose to wear a T-shirt to work because I'm not really going anywhere; all of that kind of stuff. Or that I'm driving a brand-new Ford Explorer right now. My wife said, "It's time for us to get a new car." Okay. She got a Subaru last year and I got a Ford Explorer this year. I know that my daughter and my son are going to go to some really topnotch universities because we know what it means to go to college, we know what it means to have a university education. Unfortunately, there's still a lot of families that don't know that. They don't understand that.

This is great. I appreciate it. Thank you. I want to give you one last thought. Anything you felt like you want to add that you didn't get a chance to?

I know I did a lot of talking and I know I went all over the place, so hopefully you can make sense out of all of it.

No. It was fantastic.

It was great, Jose. I appreciate it. I appreciate all your work, too, on our advisory group for this project. I think we feel the timing is so perfect.

[End of recorded interview]