

AN INTERVIEW WITH LESLIE MUJICA

An Oral History Conducted by Barbara Tabach

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

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

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University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2018

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The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of a National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) Grant. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank University of Nevada Las Vegas for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

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

Leslie Mujica – Guatemalan born; family immigrated in 1980.

Las Vegas since 2005.

Successful career in construction related industries. Believes in volunteering.

Advisory board for Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada project

Also, provides testimony of living during the earliest stage of the COVID pandemic in 2020.

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June 2, 2020

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Barbara Tabach

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LATIN VOICES
OF SOUTHERN NEVADA

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Signature of Narrator Date

Barbara Tabach 5/29/2020
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ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV

The Great Pause: Las Vegas Chronicles of the COVID-19 Pandemic



Image by Aaron Mayes, Visual Materials Curator, Special Collections & Archives, UNLV Libraries

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Barbara Tabach 5/29/2020
Signature of Interviewer Date

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Today is June second, 2020, and I am with Leslie. I am Barbara Tabach.

Leslie, would you pronounce and spell your name for the project?

Yes, ma'am. It's Leslie Mujica; L-E-S-L-I-E, M-U-J-I-C-A.

Is Mujica your maiden name?

No. that is my married name. I decided to keep it because of the business that I've been in since I came to Vegas in 2005, which was mostly business development, marketing and being out in the community. I arrived here in '05 and I got divorced in '11, so that was six years of building a name for myself. Had I changed my last name, people would have said, who's that? I would have had to start all over again.

What was your maiden name?

Cifuentes.

Tell me a little bit about where you grew up, what your parents. What was young Leslie like?

I was born in Guatemala. I came to the United States in 1980. I grew up in, I would say, Hollywood; that's where we lived at first when we were kids. In elementary school I had the best teacher in the world. I'll never forget her. She passed away quite some time ago. Her name was Mrs. Bollington. She believed in me from the very beginning. When I went to junior high school, I never in a million years would have thought that I would have become student body president, but I did.

High school was a little more difficult because my friends were partying and going to the football games and dances and everything, and I was more concerned on earning a living. Staying in school, of course, but also earning a living. I found out about the proficiency exam. I'm probably giving you too much information.

No, this is good.

I took the proficiency exam. It's different than the GED because a proficiency exam contests your twelfth grade saying you know enough to graduate without going through that whole thing. I passed. It was hard. I don't know how many hours it was, eight hours or something. I immediately went to register at Santa Monica College. I think I was seventeen.

I had two jobs. I worked at a French bakery in the morning and went to school in the afternoon, Santa Monica College, and worked at the Beverly Center at a leather shop at night. That was pretty much my childhood. That's how I grew up.

You emphasized that you needed to be earning money. Why was that important?

I think early in life I realized how important it was to earn a living and be independent. My dad left us. I think that was another reason. My dad left us, unfortunately, and it was such a contentious separation with my mother, I think he said, "And I never want to see them again," and he left. Although I was already working—actually, I wanted to make him proud, and that's when I went to college. I took the proficiency on my own. I remember coming back from registering at Santa Monica College, so I was already working. I was working at the bakery and showing him that I had registered for college, but he left anyways. I don't know if I did it to keep him around. I don't know. I was too young to realize it wasn't about me. It was about him and my mother. My mother was alone. I don't know. I felt like I had to take care of myself.

Are you an only child?

No. there's three of us. I'm the middle child; my sister is one year older, and my brother seven years younger, I believe. He was just my little brother. As a matter of fact, funny story, all through kindergarten and up to maybe up through the time he was maybe eight or ten, because I think I was only fifteen myself, I would go to the parent-teacher conferences when anything

happened with my brother because my parents didn't speak English well enough. Whenever my brother got a notice, I'm the one that went. Luckily I didn't get any pushback, like, why are you here, kid? They kind of learned to respect the fact that I was his caretaker, his representative, if you will.

My sister left the house right after my dad. She was seventeen and got married. That's not going to be in the story, though, right?

Everything you're saying is being recorded. You'll get a copy of the transcript and you can cross out anything you want taken out.

Okay.

Because I'm not trying to pry.

No, that's okay. It was just my brother and I at one point. I felt like I looked after him. Work for me has been important; since I knew I could work, I've always worked.

What kind of work did your parents do?

They worked in an assembly line, minimum wage jobs.

They immigrated in what year? You said 1980?

Yes.

What brought them at that time?

They wanted to give us a better future. I commend my mother because when my dad left, I was—I can't be exact. I'd have to be very sure. But I was either sixteen or seventeen—I was sixteen because I think my sister was seventeen, and my brother was little; he was eight or seven. I think she kind of mentioned it; we're going to go back to Guatemala. Maybe that's why my sister left. I don't know. I want to leave my sister out of this because we're estranged from each other; we don't talk. It's been a very volatile relationship.

My mother could have very easily forced my brother and I—let's go—and she didn't; she stayed. I owe a lot to my mother and I tell her. Our family wasn't very lovey-dovey, huggy ever. But I have said to her that I commend her as a strong woman because thanks to her we were able to have a future here. That's pretty much my childhood here in the United States.

Was Guatemalan culture big in your life, or just the language? How were you Guatemalan in Southern California?

We don't have—well, even then I don't know that there was a strong community of Guatemalans. In Los Angeles, Mexicans rule. It was kind of hard—and maybe this shouldn't be part of the interview, so we have to be careful, maybe cross it out. Being from Central America, growing up in Los Angeles, in Hollywood, Mexicans would bully us and say, “This is our country. You don't belong here.” It was tough for us being from Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras. Yes, we were bullied.

But you overcame that and you became the class president. You became a leader in your school, it sounds like, despite this.

Yes. As a matter of fact, it was interesting because I became student body president in junior high school. I wish I would have done the same in high school, but, again, in high school, while my friends were having fun, I was more interested in, how am I going to make a living? But that didn't mean no education. That was very important to me. The way that I found how to do that is when I found out about the proficiency and said, oh, I can get the best of both worlds: find a job and go to college.

What did you want to study?

Administrative justice. I wanted to be a detective. I wanted to be a cop. I think they called AJD, administration of justice, at Santa Monica College, but that's what I registered for. And I got my

first scholarship, seventy-five-dollar scholarship. I got it for one semester. I lost it the second semester because I was working, which is why I have the endowment at UNLV, because I want to leave something for someone, leave a legacy so that they don't have to go through what I went through.

That's really great. With UNLV you're on the foundation?

I'm in the Heritage Circle for the endowment, which they call now the 1957 Society. The Legacy board, I'm on the board of the UNLV Alumni Legacy board. And, thanks to you guys, also with the libraries.

Yes. Tell me, how did you end up in Las Vegas, and what year did you arrive here?

I arrived in Vegas in 2005, which at first was culture shock because it was different than Los Angeles, California at the time; it was so much faster when I came from that work culture, if you will, into Las Vegas. Also the pay. I had to take a pay cut coming from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, so that was shocking. But you have to do what you have to do.

I went right into construction. I worked for a developer. It was during the heyday of construction, so you were talking about a longtime million-dollar luxury condo. It went bankrupt. Luckily for me, since I was director of operations, I would attend all the construction meetings with all the disciplines, so the engineering, the MEP engineers, the parking, architects, general contractors, construction management firm. When they went bankrupt, of course all these people were upset because they were left holding the bag because there was no money. But in all that I got lucky because the construction management firm offered me a job. They're like, "We would love to have you." I went to work for them, which was a great experience because I learned so much from that firm that I would credit my construction career to that firm.

Do you want to mention the name of that firm?

No, I don't think so, and I'll tell you why. Again, this was heyday of construction, and when it came down it came down hard.

You're talking about the recession.

Yes. A lot of layoffs. It was heartache for a lot of people. I ended up being laid off from that firm. They left town. They were originally from San Diego. The Las Vegas office was just a satellite.

After that I went to...I'm trying to remember when I went to Three Square. Because of my background from Los Angeles, working for nonprofits, when I was at my job and everything was going great, I saw in the newspaper that Three Square was this food pantry that was going to start opening up and some of the people on the board were trying to put it together. I recognized the name of (Punam Mathur's mother). I had met her when I was interviewing for jobs when I came to Las Vegas. She was so kind to me when I interviewed that when I saw her name, I called her. I said, "I just read about you and Three Square, and I wanted to volunteer my services." She's like, "I can't believe this." I said, "I have a background in nonprofits. I know about grant writing. I've also worked on the philanthropy side. I know what they're looking for. When you apply for a grant, I know what the philanthropy side looks for because I used to do that. I used to go through all those requests and look for things. And I could write grants." She's like, oh my god that would be great."

I volunteered for Three Square when there was nothing; there was no office; there was nothing. I was helping getting the seed money for Three Square. The first grant request I wrote was for...I think it's called the Lindsay Foundation. We need to make sure we get that right. It was the Kerkorian foundation; I think it's called the Lindsay Foundation, and the Hilton, for seed

money. We got it. That's one thing that I'm very proud of because, again, there was nothing. It was just starting and look what it turned into.

It's substantial now, my goodness. The community depends upon them.

Unfortunately when I lost my job, I had to let them know that I was looking for work and I couldn't volunteer anymore. I kind of still helped out as a consultant for a small fee and still continued to help them out for a while.

I've been in construction since 2005. After the construction management firm, then I went to work for an MEP firm here in town.

What kind of firm?

MEP, mechanical, electrical and plumbing engineering firm. After that I went to work for an environmental engineering firm, which was a great experience because that's where I got involved with the Small Business Administration. I got to go to D.C. a lot to work with the SBA office. Also, I went to a lot of meetings at NAVFAC, which is the navy command facilities in San Diego. I was on the board of SAME, which is the Society of American Military Engineers. That was great. I've been blessed with the ability to be able to—I don't know if obtain the best out of all my jobs—grow within my position. Instead of doing enough to get by, or instead of saying, well, this is what I'm responsible for, I've always done the most I can with what I have, if that makes any sense.

Sure, yes.

Then I went to work for a recycling company, helping with sustainability. Now I'm here.

And you've been there at the—there's a lot of initials with your job.

A nonprofit organization that advocates and promotes the electrical union industry.

What is your typical day like in your position now?

Pre-COVID or COVID?

This will be a nice segue, so pre-COVID and then how it's changed since the COVID-19.

Pre-COVID I would say it was kind of 24/7 because I had events to attend whether it was at night or whether it was weekends; it didn't matter, I had to be present at all these meetings and events. Now, COVID, it's still a lot of work, but it's different because now it's all virtual meetings and webinars and Zoom meetings, so there is a lot of colloquy presentations and more notes to be taken because you're not physically there; it's here. It's kind of different, but it's still a juggling act.

You still work full-time since COVID?

Oh yes.

Did you always go into your office or did you office at home? What were your options there?

At first I was respecting the orders of the governor until we understood. The first week when it got closed down, it was working from home strictly. But the second week, when I started feeling things, construction being essential and I am part of construction, even though I'm not out in the field, but it's a level of support, construction, I started to come in intermittently. A few weeks ago I started coming in practically every day, and this week it's for sure every day. It's nonstop.

Did your responsibilities change with COVID for people that you work with or for?

No, nothing has changed because, again, I still have board meetings that I prepare for and I still have reports that I have to give. I still have to maintain the functions of the office. I still have to manage the investments that we have. I'm responsible for the budget and the money that we have. Payroll, even though there's not that many of us, benefits and all those things, I still have to do. My work didn't diminish. It actually made it a little more difficult because you are

handicapped by the fact that you don't have everything with you. That's why I finally said, I can't do this; I have to—I can do a lot from home, but I felt more comfortable being in the office. Even though I try to take as much work as possible, there were times when I was like, oh, if I was at my desk... That's why I said, I've just got to be at my desk.

Did you have to furlough people in your office?

No.

That's good.

Yes.

What's your interaction with workers and union members?

That is one thing that I did do, was I ordered some face masks. I represent the union members and I represent the union contractors, so I get funded by both. When the need for masks arose, I ordered some, and when they came in I met with our union members, and we went to the stadium because there had just been a stronger need at the stadium, at the new Raiders stadium, for masks, and we gave them out. We started giving out masks.

As far as interaction in my office, there's only one other person. I felt really comfortable just coming in by myself. I'm the executive director, so I could come in or not come in, but I prefer to be in the office.

How many times do you have to go out on a worksite? Is that common to your job?

No. I cannot just walk onto a site. I would have to call one of the representatives of the union and say, I would like to go to the stadium, or, I would like to go to the LVCVA and see what's going on and take notes on how everything is progressing and those things.

Did you have to pay attention to different things as the pandemic became invasive of our life; the city started closing down?

The one thing that I've been trying to do is I've been trying to absorb as much information as far as the small business loan information or certain OSHA rules, just pretty much stay on top of the information coming out so that if one of my board members said, has anybody heard about this? that I could say, oh yes, I attended a seminar and this is what they said. To be kind of a resource for them.

Would an organization like yours be eligible for any of the CARES or the PPE money that the government made available?

My organization, no, because I'm a nonprofit and I get funded.

Let's talk about you personally when the pandemic hit. When do you remember first being aware that there was a disease out there, do you remember?

Quite honestly, I would say a couple of days before it was announced that we needed to stay home. I feel terrible that I wasn't paying attention to it. This is how naïve I was about the whole thing. I think the governor might have announced something on Thursday. Was it Thursday?

I think it was around the 18th; something like that.

Let me look at a calendar right quick.

I know that by that Thursday, the 18th, we were closed at UNLV.

Okay, there we go. The 18th was a Wednesday. If he said something on Wednesday, and you guys were closed on the 19th, on the 19th asked my staff member to take some work home over the weekend. I said, "Please take some work home, two or three days' worth of work." I didn't think that it was the kind of thing—over the weekend we're going to figure things out, maybe three days of closure, a week at the most, and then we were going to be back at work back in the office. As we all know that's not what it turned out to be.

Here is a funny story. I read an article about a month ago. I don't know when it came out, but it just came to my attention about a month ago about CES. Did you read it?

No. I don't know if I read that one.

Well, it says that they believe the outbreak—that there must have been a start of the outbreak back at CES because there were a lot of people from different countries that came in. This is all based on a gentleman's accounts of his travel back from CES. I wish I had the article because I'm not going to be accurate. But he was traveling from here back to San Francisco to Italy or some European country and back to China. He said that he remembers being in the American—which I'm a member of the Centurion Club—he said he remembers being in the lounge at the airport and everyone was coughing. He said that some people laughed and said, oh yes, there's something virus or the something travel." I don't remember. That's why I'm telling you I wish we could get that article.

I will look for that.

We freaked out because we're like, wait a minute, we went to CES and I was there for two days, because that's part of my job because our electrical union puts together all those; it's a major contractor for CES, putting together the booths and the electrical power. They'll be doing the buildup for that. I'm thinking, wow that's nice to know and thank God, by the grace of God, I didn't get it. It kind of hit me later how more aware we need to be, I think, in the future.

Were you frightened at first? One of the survey questions we like to ask people is on a scale from one to ten, at the beginning how frightened were you by the news that this imminent pandemic was surrounding us?

I wasn't. Not to be—I'm cautious. From the time that we went on lockdown until now, I've been staying at my boyfriend's house because he said, "If we're together we know we're safe because

there's just the two of us communicating with each other." We really have not let anybody into our circle. He's the voice of reason because he says, "We're not going to do this. We don't do it. I don't want to do that and we don't do it." We've been wearing the masks, doing the hand sanitizer, being very, very careful. I've never taken it lightly, but I've never been freaked out over it either. I don't know if that makes any sense. But I'm not extreme.

Got you. I think you're a reasonable person, businesslike, yes. Talk about grocery shopping for you guys. You did quarantine and practice the guidelines. Did you venture out to buy groceries? Tell me about your shopping experiences.

Oh, I have a very funny story about that. Jim is such a caring person, he's such a caretaker that he takes control. He said, "Okay, we're going to go to the store." The night before—actually that might have been the 18th—the night before the shutdown, they hadn't even announced it yet, but he said, again because he is very—not just proactive, he was anticipating something. We didn't know what yet, but something. He said, "Let's stop by the store." We stopped by Albertsons and went shopping. He started just grabbing things. But, again, he knows what he wants in his house. He was very meticulous about what to pick out. It was kind of like, let's just pick up some essentials, right?

We start paying at Albertsons. Picking up a few essentials turned into a few hundred dollars. I was, oh my god. I've always been single and I live alone and I've never spent that kind of money at a grocery store. He's used to being a family man, so I think maybe that was his mentality at the time. He's like, "Oh, we should be fine. That should last us a few weeks." I'm thinking that should last us a few months, but that's just me.

Sure enough, it lasted us, I would say, about a month, and it would have lasted longer except that there was something in the news about the meat plants. I think somebody had gotten

infected at a meat plant and they were going to start cutting down the meat coming into the markets and everything. He's like, "Oh no, we're going to have to go to Costco." I'm like, "Okay." Again, he's calling the shots, right?

We go to Costco. This is a month later, after the Albertsons' adventure. Again, he's like, "I need this; I need that," putting everything in the basket. I'm looking at the basket and I'm thinking, okay, grab another basket. We grab another basket and we're filling another basket. Long story short, we ended up with three baskets. Again, it's just him and myself at his house.

We get to pay at Costco and they look at the basket and they look at us, and the lady at Costco makes a comment. She goes, "I have never seen this much groceries other than when people are going camping and it's a group of people coming in." I kind of chuckled.

He thought, well, if Albertsons was a few hundred dollars, he said, "I'm thinking this Costco trip is going to be six hundred bucks." As we're going through and putting stuff in the basket, he goes, "Oh, it might be seven." We're still going through and he said, "Oh, it's going to be eight." We get to pay at Costco and as they're putting the stuff through and charging for the things, he goes, "No, I have one more thing." He goes to go grab one more thing. As he goes to grab one more thing, the guy totals the shopping spree, if you will, and I was shocked. He puts paper towels or something on the thing, and I looked at him and said, "How much did you think this was going to be?" It was fourteen hundred dollars.

Oh my god. I get it. What did he say when he saw the total?

He goes, "Well, it is what it is." He hands them over the credit card. I'm still in shock. I'm just pushing a basket.

But here is the thing. When we got home everything came into the backyard and we had the wipes and the Lysol. Everything had to be wiped down, everything, all the boxes were wiped

down, then open it, throw the boxes out, again wipe whatever we took out and bring it into the house. Three hours and forty-five minutes. Our backs were hurting. I told him, “You know what we should have done? We failed here because we should have filmed this as to what to do with your groceries.” Now there is some. But he is so amazingly organized that he has a food savor. I don’t know the proper name for the one you seal things.

Oh yes, I know what you’re talking about.

He has the patience of a saint. You know Costco. It’s not like you can get a little bag of garlic; it was a bag of garlic. He peeled the garlic, put them in individual bags, like a handful of them, and sealed them. We did that with the garlic, the cheese, the ham, the onions. It’s crazy. I’m telling you he could teach a class on doing this. He goes, “We definitely have a few months of groceries to live on.” And I’m like, “A few months? I could live the rest of the year on this stuff and not bat an eyelash.”

Did you go to a grocery store again?

Yes, we went Sunday morning. There are certain things, like milk, you run out of milk and bread. We did freeze bread, but still some bread. And eggs. He’s very particular. He pays attention to expiration dates. I’m bad. Some things expire, but I taste it and I’m like, it’s still good. Not with him. If it’s expired, it’s expired. He was concerned about the eggs even though they still look okay. He asks Alexa, “Alexa, how long can you hold eggs?” Certain essentials. Of course, we did buy some produce at Costco, but we went right through it, so those are things that you need to replace every now and then.

Who is the cook in the family, you or him?

Him. He does it mostly. See, this is my thing; this is what I tell people. I can cook. I am not Susie homemaker, but I can cook. I can come up with pretty good ideas for recipes. But I cook to taste.

I don't follow recipes and I'm pretty good at it. But he loves it. He comes from a family that loves to cook. His dad cooked. His brother cooks.

Do you have any Guatemalan recipes that are your forte?

I love to make *chiles rellenos*. I can make those, which you get the bell peppers and cook them first so that they're not hard, so that they're soft, and then you stuff them with ground beef. You prepare the ground beef how you like it and you stuff them. You put a little bit of cheese. Then you beat eggs and fry them with egg batter.

Sounds good.

And black beans, I love making black beans. That's what I made for him. We had some sausage that was left over, cooked sausage, and he had a can of black beans. I said, "Oh, I'm going to make something yummy." Every time I said I'm going to make it, we ended up eating something else. One morning I woke up before he did and I said, I'm going to go make that. I went to make the black beans with onions. I fried the black beans and the onions and then I threw in the sausage. I warmed up some tortillas. Then I made kind of like tacos with some avocado on top. It came out very delicious.

It sounds good. It sounds great. Did you exercise or change your personal routine during the pandemic's early days?

We tried a few things. He has an inside little putt-putt golf thing, so we played that for a while. Then every now and then we would go for walks, not as often as we should have. But he's very active around his house doing projects in his house, so I helped out with some of those. We kind of kept active that way. One thing he loves to do is puzzles, so we started to do puzzles. He is so good at them that I kind of gave up on it because he gets all into it and I felt like I was just in the

way. I think he's up to seven puzzles, and some of them a thousand pieces, some of them five hundred, some of them seven hundred pieces.

News, media. How did you receive the news about what was going on from March on?

At first we would listen to the news every day. Every day we were on it trying to follow it so much so that he built his own spreadsheet. He started following the change in numbers from the very beginning. I think he's still doing it right now, how many deaths and everything. Finally we stopped watching the news. I would say about three weeks into it, we would just watch it at night. But when it first started it was morning, afternoon and nighttime paying attention to where we were and what Fauci was saying, what Dr. Birx was saying. ... Following all the experts. I'm unhappy—I don't know if you want that in the story, but I'm unhappy with our leadership and how the whole thing was handled. I think it was poorly handled, especially being one of the top, leading countries in the world. I think we should have been on top of it and it should have been handled properly.

I agree totally. How does the construction part of Las Vegas look in the near future, the next year, would you say?

I think we're doing great. Again, by the grace of God, I think we're going to do well. There are a lot of projects. Perhaps some people, by that I mean developers, are kind of gun-shy right now, but that doesn't mean that projects are going to get canceled and not move forward. I just think there may be a bit of a slowdown, but I don't even think it's going to be so much for us to pay attention to. I think the construction industry is just going to continue. I'm hoping that we learn from what happened at the heyday of CityCenter where it was either feast or famine. I think we're in a better position right now.

That's good. I'm glad to hear that. Also, you mentioned CES earlier. Conventions are such a big part of Las Vegas. How do you see that part of our economy coming back?

As a matter of fact, there is a virtual convention, virtual conference if you will, tomorrow about this particular subject that I'll be attending. I think we're going to bounce back. There are losses obviously that we can't recover in its entirety. What I mean by that is that we're going to do much better than others. Las Vegas was one of the first to step up to seek certification. I wish I could come up with the name quickly. But there's a certain certification for convention centers to assure that your convention center is ready as far as health reasons. It was just on LinkedIn.

Who set up this certification?

An organization in the exhibition industry. I will find it. As a matter of fact, I just saw it and I think it's B-A-C-H, Bach Certification or something. But Las Vegas was one of the first to step up and seek that certification, so we are preparing. I believe from the last meeting that LVCVA held that we're still moving with the opening of the new convention center. That's still underway. Plans are still there for that.

If you don't find it now, you'll get the transcript and you can add that in there, if you would, or email it to me and I'll make sure it gets in. I think that's important information.

The creativity that we're going to have to go through as a community to rebuild our economy is tremendous. We have the highest unemployment in the nation; we're ranked number fifty out of fifty states, or number one in unemployment. I don't know which number you want to reference, but we're the worst. How does that impact you? Do you have to address that in any certain way?

It's heartbreaking because we depend so much on tourism and entertainment that if we don't have people here, how are we going to put people to work? That's what's troubling and that's

why I thank God for construction moving forward, or else we would be in worse shape. This would be terrible because you would have a lot more people not working. But I'm hopeful. This is why it's important for people to adhere to the rules and be careful and not be lackadaisical now with the rules because what would be worse would be for us to open and people get careless and we have to close again. That would be worse than for us to wait, do it right, and hopefully begin our new life.

Yes, our new life, our new normal. There's so many new words and new phrases that we've incorporated.

Our new reality.

Yes. With the Latinx aspect of this, how did you decide to get involved with The Latinx Voice project, as being on our board of advisors?

I had heard about the project and I believe...was it Kelly that approached me?

Probably, yes, Kelly McCarthy, our development person, yes.

At an alumni event. Then when I learned more about it, I loved it. I feel honored, to be honest with you, to be part of it.

It's been great to have you on the board. It's been a fascinating project for me. I've learned about cultures other than my own background. The Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada is huge; it's a tremendous part of our population, part of our growth. Is there a Guatemalan community here, or does that matter? It seemed to be minimal in So Cal for you.

If there is one I haven't heard of one. This is a funny thing: The closest I've come to that is yesterday—you know that neighborhood Nextdoor? Have you heard of Nextdoor, the app? Somebody put *tamales by so-and-so*. I don't want to give the person's name because I don't know if she would want it. I opened it and she was talking about some lady who said, "Oh,

they're delicious and wonderful and you should order some." Then somebody asked, "Well, how much are they?" Then the person that is making the tamales says, "Well, I'm from Guatemala," and she gives the prices of the tamales. I'm like, oh my god, there's someone from Guatemala. As you know by now doing this project, or maybe you knew before, different cultures, different food. Even though they're called the same thing, they're not the same; Guatemalan tamales are different than Mexican tamales.

We also have something very special that I also know how to make, but it is a ton of work, and they're called *paches*, P-A-C-H-E-S. They are tamales made out of potatoes. Kind of like mashed potatoes instead of corn, which is what tamales are made from, maize from tortillas. We do have tamales-tamales that we make in Guatemala, but we also have this other version that's called *paches* and they're made out of potatoes. You boil the potatoes and then you peel them. You make sort of like mashed potatoes, but we don't get to the smoothness of mashed potatoes; they're more just smashing it, giving it flavor and everything. Then you get the banana leaf and you put it in the banana leaf and then you stuff them with the same; chicken, pork or beef. But the key is in the sauce that you use for the meat, whichever meat it is.

My father was the king of *paches* so much so that my mom learned and I learned. It's not just making a sauce-sauce. On the fire he would roast the peppers, he would roast the onion, he would roast the tomatoes, and I'm leaving some ingredients out. Then you put all that in a blender and you make the sauce. After you make the sauce, then you fry the meat and pour the sauce on it and make these *paches*.

You're making me hungry.

The thing is that it's such a process that when you start it—a few years I made them with my mother in California—you start the day before by boiling the potatoes and making that part of it

and making the sauce. Then you go through the night making the *paches*. Oh, of course, you put them in foil. After you put them in the banana leaf, you put them in foil paper and then you boil them. Then they're ready to eat.

It does sound like a lot of work, though, so it's got to be worth it.

They are.

Is your mom still alive?

Yes. My mom and my dad, yes.

They're in California?

Correct.

During this period of our history with the pandemic, were you able to keep in touch with them and check on them? How did you do that?

Unfortunately—again, I don't know if we want this in the story—my father and I are estranged from each other.

Right. But with your mom.

His daughter posts things on Facebook and that's how I know if he's okay.

But my mother—this got really bad because she went to Guatemala to visit my grandmother, who is our saint, beginning of March. So you know where I'm going with this. She couldn't come back. She got stuck. She went there beginning of March and she was supposed to come back at the end of March, and she got stuck in Guatemala because they closed travel. She was frustrated. She is a U.S. citizen, but when our president said that he was closing the borders and he didn't want anybody coming into the country, my mother freaked out, and she's a supporter. Shocking, isn't it?

She was freaking out and everything, and my brother goes, “She won’t listen to anybody but you. You need to call her.” And I did. I kept in touch with her through the Facebook face-to-face thing. My uncle is very techie in Guatemala, so we were able to see each other. I had a heart to heart with her, and I said, “Mother, you are a U.S. citizen. You have a blue passport.” That’s how I put it to her because she wasn’t getting it. “You have a blue passport. Don’t be afraid. You can come in and out whenever you want. He just said that towards other people.” A lot of things transpired in our conversation because we disagree when it comes to that.

I had to calm her down, and I said, “Just follow the instructions at the embassy.” She did. The United States embassy finally opened up the ability to be able to purchase a ticket to get back.

I feel terrible for her because her return ticket, she has not been able to get the company to give her a refund, and she had to pay three times as much to come back. Everybody was saying, oh yes, you go get your money back for whatever your other ticket was, and she has not been able to get her money back.

Is it an American airline? I thought most of the American airlines were cooperating with people on their fares.

I can’t tell you that.

I’m just curious.

You just made me think about it because I told her, “Mom, I’ll take care of it.” She goes, “No. I’m going to go to the place where I bought it and see what happens.” They’re giving her the runaround, so I don’t know.

That’s too bad. But she came back now.

But she's back. Again, I kept telling her, "Mom, just relax. You're better off over there."

Because at the time Guatemala only had six people with COVID. I said, "Mom, there's thousands of people in the United States with COVID. There's thousands of people dying." She said, ""No, but I'm not going to be let in." She finally got back. She's okay, staying safe. My brother checks in on her every now and then.

Good. This has been great. Any other stories about any part of your life that I haven't touched on that would be good to add?

One thing that I love to do, as we talked before, is helping out in the community. One of the organizations that I'm so proud to be a volunteer for is Las Vegas Rotary. They have a great program in December that's called Santa Clothes. Jim actually started with the program over twenty-four years ago when they had a handful of kids and a few dollars, but has now expanded into three hundred and sixty-five kids a year and two hundred dollars' worth of clothes from JCPenney. JCPenney is a great supporter because they give a discount and they close the store for a couple of hours so that we, the volunteers, can shop with the kids. We get two hundred dollars to spend on each child. That's an amazing program because you see some of these kids that have never seen new clothes. When you tell them, go find a pair of shoes, they look at you like deer in the headlights, like what do you mean? No, no, go get some shoes, a jacket, some pants. No toys; it's just essentials: jackets, shoes, clothing, winter clothing for school and things like that.

I think that what we need to do more of is concentrate on the positive things we can bring to our community, not in the negative things to highlight, and I think that's important.

I think that's really important in light of everything. Even the title of the pandemic part is The Great Pause. It gives us time to reset our minds and everything. If you were to reflect on the past few months, what did you learn about yourself? What surprised you the most?

You have to learn to be patient. Again, I don't comment on Facebook. I don't get dragged into things. I don't take the bait, if you will, when it comes to politics, racism or religion, although when it comes to religion—and I don't like to use the word *religion* because it's not that. I have my beliefs and my values and my heart. I was raised Roman Catholic, but I listened to a Baptist preacher, so I don't have a denomination, if you will, but I do know my love for the sacrifice that our Lord Jesus made for us. I believe in that. I don't know if I'm going to do it justice, but there's a person in the Bible that says, "Lucky are those that without seeing believe," and I'm proud to consider myself one of those people because it's in my heart. It's just like *ethics*; what does ethics mean? Doing the right thing when nobody's watching. I feel the same way that I would never murder anybody because somebody is watching and he's in my heart. When it comes to religion, for Easter I will put Psalm 23 on my Facebook. But when it comes to politics, I don't like to take the bait because it just turns into disaster. Same thing with what's going on today.

The one thing really, two things do bother me of what has happened with this. All the people complaining while we're going through this crisis, *you can't tell me what I can't do; I have the right to go wherever I want; I have the right to wear or not wear a mask; I have the right to go outside*. Why? Why are you focusing on complaining? Be grateful that you're alive. Be grateful that somebody is watching out for you. Look at all the nurses and doctors. My niece is a nurse in California. Look at all these people putting their lives on the line. What would we do if the nurses and doctors say, yeah, we're not going into the hospital; we don't want to be

exposed? What do we do? Stop and think about that before you complain that you can't go to your favorite restaurant, before you complain you can't go to the gym to go workout. Think of the hundred thousand people that have lost their lives. Think about the doctor that took her life, the young doctor that took her life because of all the death and despair that she saw that she couldn't handle. Take a moment to be critical and stop complaining. Look at what's happening right now, this person lost his life and now these people are turning it into a disaster.

You're referring to George Floyd's death.

Yes, may God rest his soul. We've lost the purpose of the protests because now people are taking advantage of his memory; that's the way I see it, by looting and destroying things. Now it's turning into that and the focus has shifted from this man's life that was lost to people capitalizing on it. Now we've lost a few other people: the shop owner, the other guy that got into a fight with that other owner, and now we have a cop, and God bless his soul. I hope he's okay. I don't know what the latest news is on that. It's heartbreaking. It's exhausting to just experience it by looking at it. It's not that I don't care. I think I care too much to say anything because the message gets lost.

Do you find it fatiguing?

Yes. I couldn't believe it. How do you think that by destroying others you're going to make a difference? That's not what Martin Luther King was about. It took so much to build this country. Is it terrible? Yes. Is it true that—we were watching a movie last night based in 1968 that involved the same issues of rioting because of race and equality and all that. We both looked at each other, and I said, "Oh my god, that was over forty years ago." If I'm doing the math right.

Fifty years ago.

Fifty years ago, yes.

I remember it well, so yes.

We're in the same spot. We looked at each other because we like to pick movies that are based on true events or actual—every now and then we watch a comedy just to kind of let your mind go. But we like to watch based on true story movies. When we put this movie on, he looked at me and goes, “You’ve got to be kidding me.” And I’m like, “I didn’t know exactly what it was about.” It was like watching what’s happening now, but from 1968.

What movie was it?

I’ll tell you what it was. It was Jean Seberg story. S-E-B.

I hadn’t seen that. I’ll have to look for that.

It has a very tragic ending. I’m not going to give you the story. You should watch it.

I will. I forgot to ask you: what did you and Jim refer to the COVID-19 in your household?

Was there one word you used for it? Epidemic? Anything?

Not really. It’s a pandemic. We actually never called it by name. It’s like cancer; you don’t like to say the word *cancer*. What do you call that? Oh, I lost it now, the term. When a term brings you fear.

But it has a negative connotation.

Right. Probably we talked about it as a virus.

What one word did you describe your life at the onset, in those first weeks? When reality is setting in, did you have a favorite word that you just—I can’t describe this, but to say blank.

I think I was more shocked than he was because I couldn’t believe that it never even came to us still. I think at first I would just call it a crisis.

I used the word *crazy* a lot I noticed. I would be searching for a word and the only word that could come out sometimes was *crazy*. *This is just crazy*.

Yes, I would agree. I used the word *crazy* a lot, *troubling times*. I didn't want to use—it's like everything became—I don't know if *cliché* is the right term. *Abundance of caution, the new normal*; there were certain terms that I was like, I don't want to hear that again. It was like over and over again. I tried to come up with my own things. I just kept saying *crisis*. When I would write to friends or people I hadn't seen, I would say, "I hope you and your family are safe and well during these troubling times; difficult times."

That was more consoling than my *this is crazy*.

[Laughing]

It was difficult sometimes to describe what we were going through. It has been so fluid. Then the change of conversation as you brought up with the protests that are going on and are actually not just our country now; they're global, because of this tragic death of a black man in Minnesota. I think your words are really good. It's a crisis and it's troubling, and it's not just the pandemic.

And it's sad and heartbreaking.

Yes, it is. If we weren't fatigued before, we certainly are right now.

Yes. It's like, what next? You start thinking, okay, we're on the mend. Well, we're on our way to recovery, to use all these health terms. We're on our way to recovery and then this happens. Now we're in a worse position than we were to begin with because now we have outbreaks. I don't know if you saw that. Now there are some states reporting higher numbers on the virus, which is within reason, of course. I just wish that everybody would just take a minute and pull back before they react and just say, how can we make this better?

I'm with you on that.

I just think, think positive.

I'm always filled with hope. I guess that's all we can try to maintain.

Hope and faith, or have faith and hope that things will get better. But how can you think things are going to get better by burning somebody's business that it took their entire life savings, entire life to build? The Latino gentleman was crying last night on the news. It just broke my heart. It broke my heart that I had to look away because it was affecting me to see this older man crying because they destroyed his business.

In general, I think minorities have been punished by this disease and these times disproportionate. That's not new, but it's definitely clear now. I don't know how everyone can't see it. Yes, it breaks your heart. Thank you.

Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]

