

AN INTERVIEW WITH FERNANDO ROCHA

An Oral History Conducted by Nathalie Martinez

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

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

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Some pseudonyms may have been used to protect participants' privacy.

PREFACE



On the road to success, it's easy to get caught up in one's individual goals and aspirations while forgetting the people and community that brought one there. Fernando Rocha is an exception. Accrediting his success to his community and mentors in high school, Fernando Rocha has learned to embrace his Latinx identity through his journey from the East Side of Las Vegas to the corporate world of banking.

Coming from Durango and Tijuana, Mexico, his parents met in Los Angeles in the mid-90s. Working in the sheet metal industry, his father's career would take them to Las Vegas during the boom of the early 2000s to the slot machine industry where they would establish their family in Sunrise Manor. Little did he know that his son would later become a corporate banker working alongside the same industry with Wells Fargo.

In his oral history, Fernando looks back on his adventures playing hide and seek among the remnants of the Mexican Revolutionary Era in Durango, and his "limited" responsibilities making tamales each holiday season. Growing up catching baseballs in his backyard from the games at Eldorado High School, Fernando was tightly connected to his community and strove to pursue higher education. From a young age, his confidence began to grow from his role as a translator in his family and continued as a student in the Law magnet program at Canyon Springs High School.

Between mock trial sessions and his studies, Fernando also found the time to co-find the Nevada Youth Coalition to further uplift the Latinx students in the area through professional and

educational development. He talks about the power that comes with the ability to tie a tie and what it meant for him and other students in the program. Counselors Leo Morietta and Richard E. Barbow in the GEAR UP program (also known as Upward Bound) would later propel him to apply and ultimately earn the Gates Millennium Scholarship.

During his time studying economics and mathematics at Hofstra University, Fernando found himself as a member of the mere 5% of the student population identifying as Latinx. Staying close to foreign exchange students from Latin America to maintain his Latinx connections, he became aware of how “being Latino and Hispanic is more of a spectrum”—one that extended much wider than the Mexican demographic he had been exposed to in Las Vegas. As a sophomore in college, his social network continued to expand through his engagement with Wells Fargo. A series of internship programs with the company allowed him to fulfill his goal and secure a full-time position with the office in Las Vegas. His experience in the field shows how banking in Vegas is “much more than just the casinos and slot machines.” His connection to the community drew him to come back to support the journey of other students.

Fernando Rocha’s efforts have allowed him to pave the way for other Latinx students as a mentor who believes that a student is more than the zip code they grew up in. His work serving on the board of the Latin Connection with Wells Fargo and the Association of Latino Professionals of America (ALPFA) Nevada Chapter, has allowed him to re-engage and help those who want to break the cycle of poverty. Reflecting on his years in Hofstra as a “closeted Latino,” Fernando advises his students in ALPFA and the CSN Nevada Promise Scholarship program to embrace their Latinx identity, values, and culture. He tells them to “bring that sort of pizzazz and that spirit that the Latino community has and bring it to your everyday work and establish it as a norm.” As a proud Nevadan, Fernando continues to embrace the diversity of the city and seeks to continue paving his journey and breaking down the barriers that have impeded the success of the Latinx community.

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November 13th, 2019
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Nathalie Martinez

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LATINX VOICES OF SOUTHERN NEVADA

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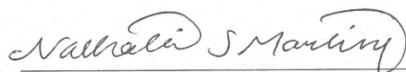
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Signature of Narrator

11-13-19

Date



Signature of Interviewer

11-13-19

Date

Good evening. Today is November 13th, 2019. We are at the Wells Fargo Building Headquarters on Howard Hughes Avenue. We are here in the conference room with...

Barbara Tabach.

And Fernando Rocha.

And Nathalie Martinez. Fernando, may you please spell your name for me?

Sure. Fernando, F-E-R-N-A-N-D-O. Rocha, R-O-C-H-A.

Thank you. We'll go ahead and start off. I'm going to ask you; how do you identify?

I identify as Hispanic or Latino or Mexican.

Depending on where you are, do you switch between the three?

I think that—and it may not be the most politically correct—but I tend to interchange them at least when describing myself. But when I speak about the community at large, I tend to say Hispanic or Latino.

Going to Mexico, were you born there?

I was not. My parents were, though. Both my parents were born in Mexico. My dad is from Tijuana, Mexico, which is on the border. My mom was born in Durango, Mexico. It's just me and my sister, and we were born in Southern California, and that's where my parents had met, California. Seven years later they had my sister and then me three years after that.

What's your sister's name?

It's Chantel Rocha.

Have you ever been to Tijuana or Durango?

I have to both. It's been a long time; I have to say. I went to Tijuana, I think, when I was in elementary school when I first went. My dad at the time still had some family living there. We took a family trip from Las Vegas down to San Diego, and from there I believe there is a train you can take to go from San Diego to Tijuana. We did that to kind of see some of his family. I believe we visited the house of my grandma that lived out there.

Then on my mom's side, Durango, I haven't been there since 2006. One thing that was really interesting at the time—I had gone a few times when I was a kid, but the last time I went was in 2006. I was in fifth or sixth grade at the time. My sister, who is three years older, we had her *quinceañera* there in Mexico. At the time it was actually like a double feature; my grandparents on my mom's side were having their fiftieth anniversary, and at the same venue we celebrated my sister's *quinceañera*, so it was nice.

What was the *quinceañera* like?

It was honestly amazing. Just growing up and just kind of seeing around, you kind of get the sense that some Latina girls, when they get asked if they want to do a *quinceañera*, some of them don't want to do one because there's a lot of attention and a lot of scrutiny or whatever. My sister was fifty-fifty on it. She understood culturally it was something very important, but was more like, do I really have to do it? Ultimately, we did it. We had it at a venue that the locals called a casino, so it was kind of funny it was like being from Vegas. While our family is really big, at least this part, my moms from a small pueblo in Durango, every time there's a party whether or not there's family or whether we have an invitation list, the whole town goes anyway. Everyone is just really nice with each other. I think they had probably budgeted or planned for at least three hundred people to show up, but easily there was literally over a thousand people that showed up. It was a magical experience, at least for me to see. At the time it was the biggest party I had ever seen. I could tell my sister really enjoyed it.

Before most *quinceañera* receptions there is the Catholic Church component where you go to the church and then the priest offers blessings and there is a whole procession around it. I could tell that my sister was really touched by the whole experience because you could tell she was crying and stuff like that. It made me happy that she was happy, too.

That's amazing. Do you think the number of people was because it was a combined celebration?

I think so. Well, for one, definitely it was the combined celebration because my grandparents at the time were staples of the community. My mom's family had a tortilla-making business, and so they had factories where they made tortillas and they would run them to the different towns within the area, and so they knew a lot of people. My mom on her dad's side, they were land wealthy, too, but in Mexico it's a little different; it just means they have a lot of terrain and stuff like that, like ranches and stuff. They just owned a lot of land at the time, and I guess from there they knew a lot of people, too. Then the other thing, too, if you have a big party in a small town, everyone is just going to come whether or not they're invited or not.

Do you know what the name of the pueblo was?

It was Emiliano Zapata, Durango. It's named after the Revolutionary. That last time I had gone, you could see that there were remnants of that era in that time. I had a lot of cousins. My mom had fourteen or fifteen brothers and sisters, which meant for me a lot of cousins. When I was gone there when I was six, we got to play with all of them. I remember one thing that we used to do a lot was we would play at a remnant from the Revolutionary era, like a movie theater that they had that they would have plays and stuff like that. I think probably during the Revolution it got stolen and destroyed and stuff like that, but it's still standing. Fast forward over a hundred years later it's still sitting there, and me and my cousins would go inside and play in there, which would make for the best hide-and-go-seek. Then just because it's been there for such a long time,

there's also different legends and stories. My older cousins would tell me things like, "Oh, you see that huge slab of rock that's on the floor? That's because there's a witch that's underneath there." Young adults, it was a great meeting place for them and stuff like that. It meant a lot to the young people in that town even though it was from a different era.

Staying with your mom's story, how old was she when she immigrated? Do you know much of her story of coming to the United States?

It's funny, she's told me a thousand times and I've probably forgotten the exact details of it. Growing up she was one of four daughters of a household of fifteen siblings, which a majority were men. One thing I always felt bad about is that my mom, because of how things were back then, never really got to experience and do things on her own. My mom had always wanted to focus on her education and advance, and never really got to do that. Going back to the tortilla business, they would make her work there, just a family business and so forth. I don't recall exactly how my mom got the opportunity, but my mom had the opportunity to go to America. At the time my mom had crossed the border, she was undocumented. I believe she was rounded up, caught and sent back. Then later on my mom—I forget how—but my mom eventually met my dad at some point.

My dad was born in Tijuana, but his dad already had established in Los Angeles. At the time laws were a bit more lax than they are now, so my dad was able to obtain his residency through his dad. Then from there my mom, I think, had my dad either in Tijuana or in Los Angeles at some point when she had first crossed. From there they fell in love and they were together—I don't know the exact time span between they met and got married, but I think it was probably less than two years.

He probably helped her with her residency?

I believe so, yes. They're currently still residents. I've been pushing for them to be citizens for such a long time. The joke my dad always gives is that he doesn't want to be a citizen because he doesn't want to get bothered by doing the jury trials and stuff like that. From his perspective being a citizen and being a resident, he has most of the protections that any other citizen would have. For him, he jokes that the only actual thing he would have to deal with is serving on a jury, which citizens have to do, but residents aren't allowed to. I remember growing up we would get a ton of those letters in the mail from the local Nevada legal system, and then I would always have to call and let them know, hey, my dad is actually not a citizen, and then they would take them off the rolls. I'm still pushing them. I think at the end of the day for us it's more of a symbolic thing just for them to obtain that kind of status. I don't exactly know what the requirements are, but if I recall it's ten to fifteen years of having lived here and then you can apply. They have well over that. For them I think it's just a matter of applying and doing the whole citizenship test and stuff, which I can always help them with. I was really good at government and all that kind of stuff.

You mentioned that you had to call the local office. Why did you have to call?

My dad speaks English. He grew up in Los Angeles. He speaks English. My mom understands English. Growing up, me and my sister and my dad would always speak English in the house, and then my mom would understand everything, but she will respond to us in Spanish, even more now. She'll still prefer to speak Spanish. My dad with us, as the children, would speak English.

To go back to your question, he always preferred to have us handle some of his affairs just because he always was scared that he might mess something up. From what I understand, before I was even capable of understanding, they had gotten a house and stuff, so I'm pretty sure he knew how to read stuff. But it just made it easier for him to have us do some of this stuff.

What impact did that have on you while you were growing up?

I think it was a pretty positive experience just to be trusted with all those kind of things. I'm still in middle school and high school, and my dad is telling me, "Hey, can you help me do this?" He wouldn't just abandoned me to do it. He would sit, just to understand what the process is like. With me, I guess, being a millennial, having more of the technological know-how, for my dad, at the time I was growing up, probably wouldn't have known how to navigate the internet to pay a bill or something like that. But for us, it came to us a bit more naturally. I think it was really empowering to be able to be trusted with a lot of that responsibility. It helped me a lot.

My parents had just come from Mexico and not being very familiar with how the education system worked, my parents had always pushed me to always go to college, and I would have wanted to, too, because my parents didn't get that opportunity. Me and my sister always wanted to pursue that just to thank our parents for all the sacrifices they did. For me, the whole college application process I had to do mostly on my own. But because I had that experience of handling more of the adult affairs for my dad and my mom growing up, I think that really helped me on the college prep phase.

And look at you now working for Wells Fargo. It sounds like the preparation was good.

Yes.

You were born in Los Angeles?

Me and my sister were born in Orange County, California. My sister was born in Santa Ana, California. I guess over there when you're born, it's just really the hospital that you were born at. I was born in Garden Grove, California. We were all raised in Santa Ana, California. I remember I did my preschool there, a portion of my kindergarten there. At the time my parents in California were living in an apartment, and the opportunity came up to move to Las Vegas. In California maybe all they could afford was an apartment, but here in Las Vegas they could afford a house.

Looking back now, my family was just part of another diaspora of people that left California to go to Las Vegas during the boom in the 2000s. We actually followed my dad's sister. My dad only has one sister, my Aunt Isabelle. She had moved to Las Vegas first and got an apartment just to check it out and stuff. Then my dad was just inspired by her initiative and just the fact that it was really cheap here, too, and so my dad brought us out here, too.

What did she move here for, a job, or just looking?

I'm actually not too sure why she moved out here. I would imagine it was probably more a cost factor that encouraged her to move out here. My dad's sister at the time, I believe, had six or so kids. For her it made a lot of sense to come out to Las Vegas because it was way cheaper.

What kind of work did your dad find when he first moved here?

My dad from California had always been in the sheet metal industry. My dad, what he does there is he works in basically manufacturing and he's a punch operator. To cut sheets of metal, they require these huge machines and my dad knows how to operate them, even from California. It translated very nicely here because Las Vegas is a big hub for manufacturing for the slot machines in town. My dad moved from California here and especially at the time the economy was really good in 1999, 2000, and so it was really easy for him to find a job. He had jobs across a lot of different companies, but mostly in the gaming space. I know some that come to mind at the time were places like Susohap, which was a Japanese conglomerate that had a Las Vegas operation.

Matter of fact, a lot of the companies that he's worked at I'm sure were probably customers of ours at some point because what we focus on at Wells Fargo, at least in my group, is financing companies that have revenues of over fifty million in revenue, and so a lot of those companies do. They build the slot machines or they're companies that build the cabinets, the sheet metal that encase the slot machines. A lot of these companies can have potentially two client bases. They could have client bases with the slot machine companies, like Aristocrat or IGT, Scientific Games that everyone knows, or they can have it with the casinos themselves, like having some new cabinets and stuff like that.

The gaming industry was no stranger to the recession and stuff like that, and growing up we felt the pain from the recession, at least my dad for sure did. That industry is pretty volatile, and so I remember my dad was unemployed for a while probably during the main part, like '07 or '08. I don't recall how long he was unemployed, but I remember it put a damper on him. You lose your job and you feel depressed about it; I know my dad had kind of gone through that a little bit.

He eventually found a job at this company, Elite Manufacturing Technologies, which I don't think is around anymore, which kind of speaks to the boom and bust. He eventually found

a position with VSR, which I think he's been with the past five years or so. For him now it's been pretty stable.

VSR is?

It doesn't stand for anything. It's just VSR Industries. They're based out of Mountain Vista area near Henderson. They manufacture the cabinets for the slot machine manufacturers.

So, steel.

Yes, same steel thing my dad always did.

When you moved here where did you live, in what area of Vegas?

My parents bought their house in the 89110 ZIP code; that's the Sunrise Manor area. We always lived right across from Eldorado High School. We were the first owners of a new housing development they formed right across from the baseball field that they have there. I just remember growing up I always thought it was a great area. Growing up we would always have baseballs from the baseball field. I guess when they hit homeruns, they would hit our backyard and we would always have baseballs to play with. It made a lot of sense for us. We went to local schools there.

Which ones?

My elementary school path was...I had first gone to Mountain View Elementary School, and then I guess they changed the zoning or they moved me to Stanford Elementary School, which is close to Eldorado and by the Sunrise Library. Most school, I did all three years at Mike O'Callaghan, which is all the way up by Frenchman Mountain. Then from there I was zoned to go to Eldorado High School, but at the time, thanks to middle school counselors and just people coming into our middle school, we found out a lot about the magnet school programs that CCSD had at the time. They still do. At the time I really wanted to be a lawyer. I was so fascinated with the law growing up. You'd see things like Law and Order, CSI, and stuff like that. I was like, this legal thing is pretty cool. That was my decision, to go to Canyon Springs. From O'Callaghan I went up to Canyon Springs High School and joined their law program and did that for four years. It was honestly really cool.

At the time we were one of the few schools that had an actual court in the school. They would occasionally have a small claims type of thing happen there. How part of the curriculum worked is that when you were a senior, you would have an actual mock trial case that you would compete with other student groups. It was honestly a really great experience. It was all being shared by an actual judge. A local judge would come in and be the judge for that mock trial, which I thought was really eye-opening.

I'll bet. That's great.

Do you remember what case you had?

The mock trial case that we had—it was an interesting case. I don't remember too many of the details. The circumstances were there was a high school party, drinking involved, and there was a student who was drinking and driving and he killed someone. I forget what side I was on, but I think I was part of the prosecutors that wanted to put the drunk driver away. The defense was trying to get rid of the charge for him. It was interesting. Actually, no, it wasn't a drunk driving thing. It still involved some murder or something like that. It was a high school student from a party. Why I remember the drunk driving part is during the case—we all had the same case brief, but I had read the testimony of one of the character witnesses and I noticed something about how that character witness—it's heavily inferred even though it's not specifically stated—that character witness from the other side had been drinking and driving, and so I picked up on that. That's why I brought it up in court to kind of discredit him. "Don't listen to him. He was drinking and driving." Yes, that's why I remembered incorrectly. It was a good experience to become more involved in that stuff.

Tell me more about what the experience was like applying for college since you said you did that very solo. You were trying to figure it out. What was that whole process like?

Actually, let me correct myself. From my family perspective, I was doing it on my own, but I am really the product of CCSD, of all the hard work that a lot of faculty advisors and counselors had put and teachers had faith in me. While my parents obviously love me to death, they just didn't have the know-how and the procedures, but the school, to their credit, did. When I was in high school, I was always aware of the different scholarships that there was around. I don't know if it exists anymore, but we had the GEAR UP program. I don't know if they had renamed it to Upward Bound at some point or if it's a different program. We had a counselor, Richard E. Barbow, who I believe had worked at UNLV at some point after he left Canyon Springs. I credit him a lot with introducing me to all the different scholarships and opportunities there were out there, things like knowing about the Millennium Scholarship that Nevada offers. A lot of it you get automatically, but it's kind of good to know how the whole process works. Those guys helped me a lot with that.

Another kudos, too, was my high school counselor. Well, he wasn't actually my assigned high school counselor, but he was the one I looked to a lot. His name was Dr. Gocool. I think now he's a counselor at Cheyenne High School, but at the time he was with us at Canyon Springs. This guy was amazing about connecting me from the college perspective. "Okay, this is what it's like to go to college."

I actually got really lucky because at my school there was someone who had won the Gates Millennium Scholarship, which is a national scholarship by the Gates Foundation. Every year they give basically a full-ride scholarship to a thousand students across the country, minority students, Latino, Asian, African American and so forth. The year before we graduated, I

was a junior and this guy was a senior, this guy Martin had won it in our school. I don't know how many high schools there are around the country, but for us to be one of the lucky schools, we were like, "Wow, this is insane."

Martin had worked a lot with that same counselor, Dr. Gocool, and I had known Martin as well. We were both in the magnet program. He was a year older than me, but I always asked him, "What was it like to apply?" Dr. Gocool really helped me work through the whole process because the process for the Gates Millennium Scholarship was very difficult. For one, you had to have good academic standing, you had to have good community service background, and then good recommendations from a community person and from the school. Then on top of that you had ten essays you had to do. It was a very stringent process that you had to go through.

At the time Dr. Gocool served as my school recommendation person, and on the community side I had worked a lot with this other person named Leo Morietta. He is really big in the community within Las Vegas on the community service side. At the time when I was a sophomore in high school, I had always wanted to do more community service, and so at the time I was a volunteer for the Rory Reid campaign in Las Vegas. This must have been 2010, I believe. Leo had taken me under his wing. He had done a lot of the canvassing. I stayed in touch with him throughout high school. Eventually Leo formed—and I helped cofound with him—a 501(c)(3) in Las Vegas called Nevada Youth Coalition. I'm not sure if that's still around, if it still has standing or anything. The aim of that organization was to really uplift a lot of the Latino students in the 89110 area where we had all grown up by providing academic support. At the time the high school still had the proficiency exams, which if you couldn't pass you didn't graduate. A lot of Latino students were at a disadvantage for whatever reason. What we tried to do—and I was a scholar captain at the time when we founded the organization—what we tried doing was to have students come in that struggled with proficiency exams. We would come in and help them study. We would also provide more professional development. It's amazing how especially in our community something as simple as showing people how to tie a tie can be very empowering. For me, I still struggle to tie a tie. I didn't really have that kind of upbringing where I was always wearing a tie, so I still struggle to tie one. Things like that especially at an early age to really motivate someone that they can be more than what they were born into. That's really what the aim of the organization was.

Leo was the person that was my community service recommendation. At the time I had a 3.8 GPA in high school and with Dr. Gocool being my advisor and Leo being my community advisor, and maybe I wrote decent essays enough, the ten essays, from there I got accepted. They had alerted me that I got the scholarship.

You got the Gates Millennium?

I got the Gates Millennium Scholarship, which is insane. At the time there were five other students from Las Vegas that got it. They were all smart kids, definitely a lot smarter than I was.

I don't know why I got it. I know we had a student that went to Yale, one that went to Stanford, others that went to other good schools, like University of Utah. I believe Spelman College was another one.

And you went?

I went to Hofstra University.

That's a pretty darn good school.

It is, yes. Not like a Yale or something. Hofstra, looking back, was definitely a great place for me to go to school. It had the access to New York City, so all the cultural, educational and career opportunities, but was still removed from the noise and the distraction of the city. It was primarily a suburban campus, which honestly was a shocker to me. Coming from primarily an urban area, to go out there was a little different for me. When I first went through the orientation out there, I said, "This place looks really pretty." It's very green. God knows how many dollars they invest in making the campus all nice looking, but they do a really good job, those guys. It just captivated me.

What was it like to be the kid from Las Vegas there?

There was actually another student from Las Vegas, Jen Smulo, but I didn't really know her at the time. She was from a different socioeconomic background from what I was. I think maybe she went to Palo Verde or something like that. You'd be surprised. There were a lot of students from the West Coast that went to that school. I guess a lot of students, they, for whatever reason, wanted to change perspective, which is something I wanted as well, and so that's why I wanted to go out there to New York of all places.

What was the population of the school like? Here you are a first-gen student. You're from a Latinx background. Were there a lot of people like you at Hofstra?

There were a few Latinos. If I had to pick the percentage, maybe it was five to ten percent—no, more like five percent. But almost zero Mexican people. New York is primarily Puerto Rican/Dominican in terms of Hispanic and Latino. But what that said, though, a lot of those students were from the neighboring boroughs, like Queens and the Bronx and Manhattan and so forth. We also still had a lot of international students, too.

My first year of college I hung out a lot with the exchange students. We had people from Colombia, Guatemala, Brazil and so forth. I hung out with those guys a lot because at the time my strategy was, I'm out here for four years; I'm going to definitely lose my Spanish. I was already losing my skin tone. I was extremely pale when I was in college because there's no sun in New York. It's cold. There's only summer three months of the year. I'm exaggerating. At the time I felt like I would lose a little bit of my identity. That's why very early on I wanted to definitely still be affiliated with my Latino side. Those guys would always speak in English and

Spanish, but I would always talk to them in Spanish, and they would, too. It's a shocker to me that my whole life the only Latinos or Hispanic people I knew were all Mexican, and to go out there and kind of experience the spectrum of being Hispanic is much more than just Mexican. Out there we were speaking the same language, but it didn't feel like it. I was speaking with people from Puerto Rican and Dominican backgrounds, and I could not understand any of them. They just spoke much faster and had better grammar and comprehension than I did. It was an interesting experience for sure.

Did you learn any of the slang that they have from the different places?

You know what? They did have some slang. If I recall—

Like any vernacular or something.

Any vernacular, yes. Taking me back, the thing I come back to is—I don't remember so much the slang that they would speak because these guys were actually very proper. A lot of those foreign exchange student Latinos and Hispanic people, they were all actually very rich. To go to New York from Guatemala and Colombia, you have to have a lot of money. It's funny, I actually didn't know a lot of slang that they would speak because a lot of them were just extremely proper. The thing I definitely remembered was growing up here in Las Vegas, the Hispanic community is primarily Mexican. My understanding of Spanish was just way off from what theirs was. The thing I definitely remember was the amount of false cognates I was speaking, simple things like saying, oh the carpet, *carpeta*. It means a binder. The word you should be saying is *alfombra*. Little things like that I thought, wow, I'm probably the most slangy person these guys have ever heard.

Did your Spanish improve?

Definitely my Spanish definitely did improve. I was more conscious of those false cognates that I would use in my Spanish. I remember when I would bring it back home, people were saying, "He's speaking so fancy right now."

But that's the reason we sent you to college.

I know, I know. Definitely, it was interesting just to really get that understanding of being Latino and Hispanic is more of a spectrum. Being here in Las Vegas, people just associate Hispanic with Mexican or something. But you go to a place out there and it really opens your eyes. It's a lot more than that.

I couldn't have said it better myself. That's perfect. It's like a spectrum, it really is. Did you have the intention going to Hofstra to come back? Did you always have that plan to come back to Vegas?

I think I did. It was no secret that New York is extremely expensive. One thing that did open my eyes was a lot of the people from the West Coast that went to Hofstra, from my understanding I would think that maybe about 60 percent of them went back home and then 40 percent stayed, so a huge amount still stayed. Unlike most of those other people that came from the West Coast to Hofstra, I was not from the same background and means as those people were. The other thing, too, was just in general how Long Island was very suburban. I think the barriers to entry to really live in a community like that are very high in terms of the economics. I know friends that would maybe live their whole life in Long Island. To have a job in New York, it made sense for them because they could commute on the Long Island Railroad to go back home. If I were to do the same thing, it would just be prohibitively expensive. I thought at the time, unless I got a really snazzy job that really paid me the big bucks, it probably wouldn't make sense to stay out there.

From early on working at Wells Fargo, they had always—when I was a sophomore, I attended a sophomore diversity conference. For all the students in the Northeast, they picked about forty students. They took us all down to Charlotte to kind of understand the company culture. At the end of those three days, they had interviews. I landed two interviews; one was in New York and one was in Philadelphia. I think most of them, though, were slated for Charlotte. I interviewed, but I didn't get offered any of those positions. I guess the credit coordinator behind that program really liked me a lot. He said, "We have a junior intern who is starting for the summer at our Long Island office in Melville in New York." They were piloting this sophomore program, so I was part of the pilot program for sophomore summer analysts. He said, "Since our infrastructure is already in place for them to handle an intern, do you want to go join them?" I was like, "Yes, sure." I didn't know anything. I was completely clueless. I didn't know what a balance sheet was. I was just happy to be there. It opened my eyes from that perspective. Even a job with Wells, which has a high reputation, you really need a rock star, hundred-thousand-dollar-plus job to really stay out there in New York if you were from the outside, unless you want five roommates or something. I'm more of a private person.

When I graduated, I was happy to come back because my parents really did a lot for me and my sister, and so I was happy to come back to help support them. When I graduated from school, my full-time position was with Wells. I was always slated to come back to the Las Vegas office. My junior summer, internship was here. My sophomore was in New York. Then I told them, "I really want to go back to Vegas." And so, they had my junior internship here. I went back to school and graduated and became full-time and it was always slated to come back to this office, but they wanted to send me to a training thing, which was in Phoenix at the time. I was there for about seven months. February 2017 is when I was really here full-time. I moved back in with my parents and that was great to be back home. Obviously, my parents missed me to death and were really happy to have me back, and just that kind of support was really nice to have.

Vegas is home. Even after you were thrown into the big New York life, coming back here is home.

Yes, definitely, it's definitely home. My parents, I love them to death and would do anything I can for them. Since then, I've done quite a bit for them. I have since moved out, but my sister is still at home. Me and my sister both provide financial support to my parents. We don't pay rent or anything, but pay bills and do what we can to help them out.

That's nice.

What does your sister do?

My sister works as a surgical technologist. She actually has two jobs. She works at Sunrise Hospital, so surgical technologist with, I believe, maybe with their cardio department. Her second job is at a surgery center on Warm Springs, a bariatric center. The same position essentially, surgical technologist. Those people basically assist the surgeons and clean instruments, hand them things, and are able to do certain procedures, too.

What can you tell me about your involvement with ALPFA, Association of Latino Professionals for America?

Actually, when I was in college; that's when I had learned about ALPFA. Hofstra, thinking of demographics, it's surprising they had an ALPFA and it was a very active chapter. From a career-after-college perspective, I already had my full-time position with Wells Fargo already assigned and offered. I went back for my senior year already knowing I would have a job. A really good friend of mine told me, "Hey, come to this ALPFA with me." I went there and was surprised that what I thought was a Latino organization and no one was Latino.

To backtrack, ALPFA is the largest Latino professional organization in the country. I believe maybe a little over ninety thousand members across the country from student chapters, like at UNLV, or professional chapters, like I serve on the board here in Las Vegas and across different cities. Their aim is to provide professional development and really raise the profile of Latinos in the workplace. They do it by having professional speaker series. As an example, what our professional chapter does in Las Vegas is a lot of our board members are from MGM, RSM, or Caesars Entertainment, and they're bring in some of their C-suite people, especially Latino, and have them come in and speak to groups of people that are just in ALPFA, just to let them know about their career progressions, setbacks, and things that can inspire the community to go the extra mile and succeed.

Another big thing I know about ALPFA is they just provide a vast network and community. My personal experience working in corporate America is sometimes—well, as a Latino sometimes you see around and for me, especially, our department I was one of only two Latinos. Broadly in my part of Wells Fargo, middle market banking, maybe it's not as diverse as the community banking side, which is where the branches and stuff are. Those are very diverse, but higher up, like the banking echelon is not as diverse, so sometimes it can feel a little lonely just to know that maybe there's other people that may not have had the same experience as me

growing up. But to Wells Fargo credit, they have their own employee resource groups, like infinity groups. I pertain to the Latin Connection, which is the one for Wells Fargo. I'm also the chair of membership for that one. That's what ALPFA likes to do is they collect an (inaudible) gap. Where some companies may not have an employee resource group, ALPFA can be that for Latinos to be able to find that they're not the only ones where they're at. If they have, maybe, questions on how to approach certain things, maybe like a promotion, pay raise, or maybe just to know what's out there in terms of career opportunities, it's truly a great expansive network and community.

As far as the organization goes, and maybe just speaking to it locally, is there still a small percentage of Latinos working for Wells Fargo or in your industry?

I think banking is very diverse, but it's more diverse on the community banking side with the branches and so forth. As you move up with the level of lending, it's not as diverse. It's still diverse, but definitely not as diverse as the branch networks and stuff like that.

To go back to your question about how it is in Las Vegas, Latino professionals in general, I think there is definitely that opportunity to engage with Latino professionals, but it's just a matter of awareness. I think for so long Latino professionals in town maybe haven't had that sort of resource, and so a lot of them maybe are more skeptical of what ALPFA is. We're relatively new to town. There was an ALPFA chapter a few years ago, maybe the 2013 timeframe, but that one fizzled out because they didn't have a strong network to keep it going. When I was called on by Crystal Sunbury, our president from RSN, she had reached out to me because my group works a lot with all the accounting firms in town because we tend to have a lot of clients in common. We'll bank them; they'll audit them, so there's a lot of relationship there. I knew Crystal from there, our president, and she was able to let me know, "Hey, I'm starting this ALPFA thing." I said, "Hey, from college I know about it." I wasn't as involved, but at least I was aware of ALPFA. It took us a while to get through the whole chapter organization stuff, but May of last year is when we had our official chapter launch. I think August was when we were more official by national ALPFA standards.

Locally you're really new.

Very new.

Less than a year.

Less than a year. That's why it's hard to get that sort of engagement just because it hadn't existed for such a long time. But, yes, we're getting there. We're slowly having more events.

Do you reach out to the Latin Chamber of Commerce, other organizations that are serving the same demographic?

Yes. I think the main difference between us and Latin Chamber of Commerce is the Latin Chamber of Commerce does provide something very similar in terms of the networking and the community involvement, but their thing is primarily more business to business type of networking in terms of there could be a residential real estate agent who will go to a Latin Chamber event and he'll maybe talk to a contractor or something and say, "Hey, do you have any clients that need a house?" That's more so what I've come to understand that their sort of networking is for. Ours is more targeted to more of the white-collar type Latinos, and so we'll target the bankers, the accountants, and hospitality professionals, too, within casino corporates. Very similar, but we'll tend to target more of the accountants and bankers, and they'll handle pretty much everything else in terms of people that need a house will pretty much go there just because their network is a lot bigger. They've been around for a lot longer.

At Wells Fargo you said you do middle banking. Exactly what is that?

Yes, middle market banking is just the lending that our bank does to companies basically bigger than a mom-and-pop, but smaller than a Coca-Cola. Literally everything in the middle we'll target. Generally, the threshold for us in middle market is anything from 50 million in revenue to 2 billion in revenue; Sands, a few different industries. We're more like the generalists, my group, so anything from 50 million to 2 billion in revenue we'll tend to handle with a few exceptions. There are certain industries we won't cover because other groups will. As an example, the most obvious one being the casinos in town. Those are handled by actually people down the hallway here; they're with our gaming group, and so they're the ones that finance the casinos, travel casinos, and so forth. In Vegas, once you strip away the casinos, we're pretty much stocked with everything else, so we'll finance companies. Our market, I think, here is the slot machine manufacturers. A lot of them are clustered around the airport, and so we're always out there, working with our customers there. Also, more broadly, more like the support industries supporting the casinos. A customer in our portfolio is a wholesale produce supplier for the casinos. If they need chopped lettuce mix, they're the ones that send it to the casinos, pretty much like a Cisco or something along those lines.

Our group, we cover the whole state of Nevada, so we have here in Las Vegas and then we have a team up in Reno as well. It's not just gaming. It's much more diverse than that. In Reno we have a large defense contractor. We have a volleyball manufacturer; something like that. Here locally we have some fun things like people involved with a credit bureau, data centers, and so forth. It runs the gamut. It's much more than just the casinos and the slot machines.

What are your aspirations? I just listened to Don Snyder give a summary of his career. I don't know if you know who Don Snyder is, but he's in his seventies and he's a dealmaker in town for the Smith Center, and he was interim president at UNLV at one time. He told his wife when he married her like fifty-something years ago that he was going to be a president of a bank. Do you have aspirations to be something like that?

Yes.

Where would you be happy?

Where would I be happy? Right now, how my career has progressed within Wells Fargo, I started off as an analyst. It was about a two- to three-year program. I graduated back in June. Then from there I actually three months ago I was selected to participate in what we call a credit management program. For us in Wells Fargo that's like the premier banker training. You go there and you learn everything about the business, all the different partners that we have. Wells Fargo is a big bank, so they have a lot of different groups.

What I appreciated is...That program I was flying back and forth from here to Charlotte, which Charlotte for Wells Fargo is the old Wachovia Headquarters. Wells Fargo acquired them during the recession. It's a hub basically for the bank. From that whole program I was just exposed to all the different facets of the bank: commercial real estate, capital finance that does asset-based lending. I didn't know this, but banks instead of just lending debt, they can provide equity. If there's a compelling investment that Wells Fargo wants to get involved with and the matrix makes sense, they will actually provide equity. We finance startups, other things, too, like food and ag, Agriculture space, Wells Fargo is massive. Energy lending, we're the number-one lender in the energy industry. It just really opened up my eyes to all the different possibilities.

I guess what would make me definitely happy, regardless of whatever vertical within the bank I go to, the next step for me is you go in sort of like a banker role, and for us we call that a relationship manager. Their managing relationships with the companies and it's a sales-based role. I think over time—maybe when I was younger, I was very much more introverted, and now you just can't get me to shut up.

You're very confident. I like that.

Yes. I think just how I've progressed as an individual over the years, I definitely want to give that a shot. I think they've positioned me really well here. I'm currently in a commercial portfolio manager, and so that's basically doing similar to what a relationship manager does, just without sales goals. I'll still manage a book of companies, and I'll be able to develop that face-to-face client interaction that I may not have gotten as an analyst, but I will now. I'll have sort of like a say, especially with new opportunities, to how to structure a deal.

When you structure a deal with a company, for one is knowing what their financing need is. As an example, a retail company would probably want a line of credit that provides them availability to draw on the loan when they need it most, for example, maybe in the summertime so they can start building up their inventory, and then that way they can have that all ready to go for the holidays, like in the December time. From there, once they get all that money that they get from their sales, then they repay the loan and it resets and starts all over again.

That's a perfect segue to holidays. Talk about holidays in your family. You have Thanksgiving coming up and Christmas and all of that. What are the traditions in your family's household?

Definitely my family is not unique. We'll do the tamales and the *posole* and the *menudo* and things everyone else does. I remember growing up Christmas was always a magical time for us. It was definitely a religious thing, too. I believe in early December the fourteenth is the Virgin Mary's birthday. I'm not exactly sure. There's that and then we also have all the food that comes along with it: the tamales, *menudo* and stuff like that. Then my dad, growing up, he would always build a Christmas village for us. We would have the Christmas tree and little house. My dad was a big train person, so he would have a train circling the little villages and the tree from the bottom. It was always a magical time for us.

Oh, that sounds so fun.

It's a lot of work, though. Tamales don't make themselves. It's a struggle. It's just funny how times have changed. Me and my sister, we bought my mom one of those KitchenAid stand mixers. Before, historically we would always sort of mash the tamale mix. Now you can just hit the button and have the KitchenAid do it. I'll be saying, yes, you always want to preserve a tradition, but my mom is also getting older. I don't want her to have to work as hard for some of that something. If anything, if it makes it easier, why not, right?

Where are you specifically in the line? What's your role in the tamale making?

Very limited. My mom doesn't trust me. She would have me mix the tamale mix. What I would do most growing up is—you'd get the corn husk and then you would put the tamale mix on it, and then you would put the beef mix in there. She would trust me with that, which was more like the busy work, just like, *duh-duh-duh, duh-duh-duh*.

We were traditional, so my mom didn't expect me to do the work. But I had always been curious about it. I've wanted to learn. I've always been a person to know how things work. That's why I took economics in school. It's understanding how money works, how it travels in the economy. I've always been curious. Also, I'm big into mysteries and it's always asking why, why is this happening? I always bugged my mom for me to help her with things, but she never wanted me to do it. I think it was my place and that's okay.

I saw here that you're a Promise mentor for CSN. What is that? What do you do with CSN?

CSN developed a new scholarship called the Promise Scholarship, which is a full-ride scholarship. I believe it was something that the Nevada Legislature had approved, but it came with some requirements. For a student to qualify for it, obviously they had to have good academic standing and stuff like that. They built in these requirements to have them be mentored. How CSN worked that into the whole application process is as soon as they were

interested in becoming a CSN Promise Scholar, to get the full ride they would have to sit in a group mentoring session with a professional from the community. With me being involved with academics here in Las Vegas, I learned about it. They had said that for the level of demand that they were expected to get for applicants, they would need a lot of local professionals, and so I said, “Sure, I’ll sign up. I’ll be a mentor.”

We provide group mentoring, so during the school year, a few of us mentors will go out there, sit with a group of maybe ten students, and just provide guidance and so forth and just let them know just broadly that we promise we’re an open book; anything they have questions about me, or going from high school to college, or college and beyond, we’re there for them. Then there’s also not just the group mentoring track, there’s more of a one-on-one mentoring that you can have ongoing with a student, and it’s something I’m looking into for next year to do, especially now that I’m kind of done with all my trainings at the bank. I’ve had so many over the past two to three years that—now, this thing with Charlotte that I finished, now I’m back for good. I’m looking forward to reengage more with that process. It’s an amazing scholarship and thing that CSN offered.

For me I thought that an opportunity like that is basically what I got. I saw a lot of parallels to that in the Gates Millennium Scholarship that I had. I found a lot of value in having a student go basically for free, at least from my perspective. Not having to worry about the financial aspects of whether you can afford to go to school next semester or pay for a credit, once that’s out of the window, you could just really excel and do your best. I found a lot of value in what they were offering, and so I definitely wanted to get involved and help pay it forward.

A lot less pressure for sure.

Oh yes.

That’s incredible. I think my final question is: Seeing how you’re being a mentor in the community and how you’ve grown through your time at Hofstra, how do you see yourself as a Latino in the community in the sense of how much success you’ve been able to achieve so far and now going back to your roots and serving as a mentor?

I was always that kind of person that wanted to—the opportunities to get where I was, I always looked back and thought—it would be inevitable that there’s going to be one student that’s going to be in the position like I was. They’re trying to break out of maybe a cycle of poverty or just want to be something much more than a ZIP code or something. That’s why, again, I always wanted to get involved and pay it back. A lot of the opportunities I had were because people believed in me, like the Gates Foundation and stuff like that. I was never a selfish person. I was always wanting to give back and see how I can help other people.

To be quite frank with you, some of the experiences for me to help the next generation were because in my personal experience I’ve had situations where I would reach out to another

Latino person just for guidance, especially when I was in my more formative years. They wouldn't respond. They would ignore me. At the time I would speak with other Latinos, and it's definitely not to generalize what happens, but it does happen occasionally that there are sometimes individuals that once, quote-unquote, they make it in America that they kind of turn their back to their community, and that always left a sour taste in my mouth. It's happened to me a few times, like I mentioned. I would reach out to people and say, "Hey, I see you're in college already. I'm in high school. How did you do it? What's the process like?" I mentioned that I didn't really have any guidance from family, and so it was from their perspective as a Latino, how did you do it? Like I mentioned, at the time I felt that when some would make it, they would just kind of close the door behind them, and I didn't like that at all. I thought that if you do make it, you always want to give back because, like I mentioned, there's going to be someone that could benefit from that. We should definitely be making it easier for more people to have these kinds of opportunities. I think there is a lot of structural things that may impede a Latino from advancing, and that's why I want to help bring that down and help them. That's why I've really been involved in that regard.

That's an interesting observation. In your experiences whether it was college or within Las Vegas community or Charlotte, your experience with prejudice, any stories about that?

I didn't—maybe I was oblivious to it. Especially going from Las Vegas to Hofstra, which demographically may have been 80 percent white or something like that, a community like that, surprisingly I don't think I experienced a lot of prejudice. But it was just something that I had always thought in the back of my mind, maybe no one is being explicitly racist or prejudice. Something I always thought about in the back of my mind is the way that they would perceive me. Here I am at school. Maybe do they think that I'm only here because I'm Latino? There was always that in the back of my head because I've heard stories of other people that have had that.

I went to a magnet law program, and so I would read the biographies—at the time I was reading one about Clarence Thomas, the Supreme Court Justice. He went to Yale and so forth. I remember an interview he had had he mentioned about how he didn't want people to perceive him as only having gotten the opportunity of going to Yale or doing all the things he did is because he was African American. That sort of made me think, I don't want to be perceived that way, either.

Personally, when I went to college, I'd always want to affiliate with the Latinos in the community there. It just changed how I present myself, too. As an example, maybe compared to other people, I don't tend to pronounce some of the Spanish words in the Latino way. I mentioned *carpeta* and stuff like that. I just kind of say it in a way that other people would be able to understand it. If I say *carpeta*, maybe it's a little too fast, but if I say *carpeta*, something a little bit slower, maybe they would be able to understand you a little bit better. That kind of lingering thought in my head of me not wanting to be perceived as different because I didn't

want people to think that I got this opportunity because I was Latino. It made me take a step back and not want to express myself in that kind of way.

After I graduated college, I came out and worked here at the bank, and especially being affiliated with a program like ALPFA really opened my eyes that we don't have to be a closeted Latino. You can really be expressive of your Latino culture and values and speak the way you want to speak, too, and pronounce your name the way you want to. I remember when I was in Charlotte a few weeks ago, I was speaking with some Latino executives at the bank. They had told me there was an executive—I forget his name, but, for example, I want to say his name was Ivan—he started introducing himself as Iván, the more Spanish pronunciation. Just because he said, “I'm already an executive. They can't take this away from me. I'm just going to express myself the way I want to.” That sort of inspired me that I shouldn't be holding back my... This is who I am. I was born this way. I really shouldn't be holding that back. That's been my goal with ALPFA, especially as the vice president of Academic Affairs, is to tell the students that hey, maybe there's a perception that when you go from college to the pressure work that you have to leave certain things at the door and kind of be a different person than what you really want to be. That's not true. You could really bring that sort of pizzazz and that spirit that the Latino community has and bring it to your everyday work and for it to be okay.

I have to say my experience at the bank, I've never experienced issues with prejudice or anything. I think corporate America, maybe it's been different in the past, but I came into work in the bank, just broadly within corporate America when things have really changed a lot. You're more open to be more expressive of who you are.

Fantastic.

Any last words or stories you want to share to be part of your oral history?

I guess maybe the last thing I'll say is I've seen how the community has changed a lot over the years and it's getting definitely more diverse. It's definitely encouraging to see how Las Vegas has become more of a melting pot. People are being more embracive of different cultures in town. I remember when I had left to go to college, at the time I didn't feel like Vegas had a lot of culture. But when I came back, just because of all the growth that Las Vegas in general has gone through, I came back home February of 2017 and seeing things on Eventbrite and Facebook saying Margarita Festival and Taco Truck Project; all this stuff. I was like, wow, everyone is really embracing the culture, but not just Latino culture. There is also African American and Asian cultures, too. It has definitely made me feel proud to be a local Nevadan to see all the different cultures being embraced. I think more exciting times to come for sure. But I'm very excited to continue still being here in Las Vegas and hopefully be the best I can be.

Thank you so much.

I think there's no doubt about that. This is great, absolutely wonderful.

[End of recorded interview]