

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSE LEONARDO MARTINEZ

An Oral History Conducted by Barbara Tabach

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries

Director: Claytee D. White

Project Manager: Barbara Tabach

Transcribers: Kristin Hicks, Maribel Estrada Calderón, Nathalie Martinez, Rodrigo Vazquez, Elsa Lopez

Editors and Project Assistants: Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez, Maribel Estrada Calderón, Monserrath Hernández, Elsa Lopez, Nathalie Martinez, Marcela Rodriguez-Campo, Rodrigo Vazquez

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

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

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

PREFACE



For Leonardo Martinez, the United States was never meant to be a destination—it was merely a short stop along the way as he awaited the day he could safely return to his family in El Salvador. Now a man who embraces the occasional Big Mac from McDonalds but never turns away a Salvadoran *pupusa*, Leonardo has embraced both places as home with memories that took him from his humble upbringings in Santa Lucía to the bright lights of the city of Las Vegas.

In his oral history, Leonardo looks back on his youth living in a rural area of El Salvador where he was taught from a young age the values of hard work and the responsibilities that come with adulthood. Forced to work and abandon his studies, he found teachers in people like his grandfather who taught him the value of sharing and living in abundance. He talks about the poverty he witnessed growing up and being scolded for giving away school supplies from the family grocery store to those who didn't have enough to buy shoes with their uniforms. As the eldest in his family, he always looked out for others and talks about taking on the responsibility of caring for his siblings and mother.

Leonardo's story is also one of survival. His reflections on the armed conflict of the 1980s in El Salvador reveal a treacherous era of where torture was a normal occurrence and corruption was expected from both "sides" of the war. Being taken by members of the military

while on his way to school, Leonardo sheds light on the experiences and persecution that many Salvadorans sought to escape when migrating to the United States. His 41-day migration includes trekking in jungles in Guatemala by foot, riding through towns in Mexico on the train known as “the Beast”, and along unknown streets in San Diego in the trunk of a Ford Crown Victoria.

In Los Angeles, he found a city that more than a place where stereos and cars were stolen on a regular basis—it was a place where he felt free. Arriving with the full intention to save enough money to return to El Salvador to start a truck driving business, Leonardo kept the work ethic he learned from his father and dedicated himself to working. He takes us through his occupational history which include washing trailers in Calabasas and truck driving for Staples along the streets of Beverly Hills in the mid-1990s. His oral history includes testimonies of harassment by Los Angeles Police Officers, building relationships with the Salvadoran community of East Los Angeles, and balancing work with school as he earned his GED in the evenings in West Los Angeles, where he would also meet a Colombian woman named Rocio Rodríguez, who would later become his wife and the mother of his only daughter, Nathalie.

Always seeking a better financial future for him and his family, Leonardo’s journey took him to Las Vegas in the early 2000s to be apart of the economic boom of the housing market. He shares the highs and lows of his career as a loan officer and realtor as he went from accepting housing loans for low-income families to evicting families from their homes daily during the market crash of 2007 & 2008.

Seeking a path that aligned more with his interests and gave him the means to continue supporting his family in Las Vegas and El Salvador, Leonardo became a truck driver for FedEx. He talks about the opportunities it gave him to take his wife and daughter to El Salvador for the first time in 2016 and his experiences going back to a place he had left 34 years prior.

Despite the hurdles of his youth and young adult life, Leonardo Martinez is a man that continues to overcome challenges and move forward. His oral history is one of perseverance, resilience, and family. As a proud Salvadoran and American citizen, Leonardo still aspires to return to El Salvador to retire and—as his oral history demonstrates—continues working hard to make his dreams a reality.

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August 19th, 2020

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Barbara Tabach

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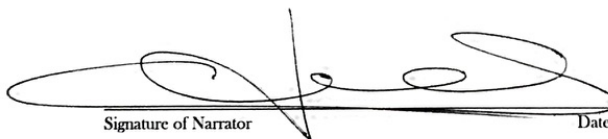
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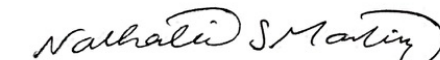
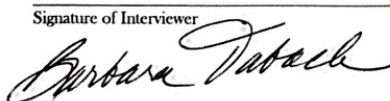
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SESSION 1

This is Barbara Tabach for the Latinx Voices oral history project. Today is August 19th, 2020. We are sitting in my office at the Oral History Research Center at UNLV. Today I am interviewing Leonardo.

I'm going to ask you to first state your name and spell it for us, okay?

My full name is Jose, J-O-S-E, Leonardo Martinez. It's L-E-O-N-A-R-D-O, M-A-R-T-I-N-E-Z.

Sitting also with us is...

His daughter, Nathalie Martinez.

Who is also part of the project. This is great. We're doing our social distancing, just for the record, due to COVID-19. This is wonderful that we're finally going to do your interview. I'm going to start out by asking you to share with us a bit about where you were born and what it was like to grow up where you did.

I was born in El Salvador; it would be exactly 1971. It's a rural area where I grew up. My dad used to take me to work from an early age, maybe around six years old. He used to take me to work with him, he said, just to learn the value and the responsibilities of what would come up when I grew up to be responsible.

What kind of work did your father do?

He would do anything, everything. He would build houses. He would do woodwork. He would sometimes make the bricks that are used to build the houses, and that's where I would come in that he used to take me with him. He taught me how to make bricks, how to use all the tools in

construction, how to work with wood, which at that age—I probably was about seven, between six and ten years old that I remember that he used to take me. I didn't want to go because I would rather stay home. I was actually forced in some way to go with him, but sometimes I wish I was sick to stay home so he wouldn't take me with him. Of course, I was the only one. I have a brother; he's two years younger than me, but he didn't bother him at all. It was me who was the one he was always taking to work. Sometimes I don't think it was helping me, but I don't know if he just wanted to feel the company of somebody else by him, but, yes, I was there.

Were you the oldest child in your family?

Yes, I was. I am. We're six; three brothers and three sisters, and that's all from the ones I know. I have a few other brothers and sisters that I haven't met yet. Yes, we're six, from my mom and dad.

**What was your home life? Was it a big house? A small house? Did you play in the yard?
Describe that a little bit, please.**

It was a brick house. It wasn't a big house. It was probably like a thousand-square-foot house. Back then in El Salvador, you build the four walls, the windows and the door, but you don't build separate rooms. You have the bed in one corner, table in one corner, even kitchen sometimes inside the house, you have in another corner, and you just put some solid dividers to split the rooms. I remember we also had a little store, like grocery store—a small one. I used to help them. It was there and it had a separators separating the rooms and the living room, which was all together, and we had one area for the little grocery store that we had—my mom had.

She sold groceries from the house.

Yes, groceries and all kinds of stuff. It was like a little everything store. She didn't have a lot of everything, but she was selling cheese, eggs, bread, coffee, sugar, rice; all the stuff that you would use daily.

Do you know where she got the products that she sold?

She would go to the bigger store and buy it from them, which since she was reselling their products, she was given a discount so that she could make a profit out of it. When my dad was working doing his own things, she would stay home, take care of that. When I got to stay home, I remember that when she had to go to the city, because we were in the rural area—we had to go to the city to get the products that she would sell in the store—she would not take me with her because I was more—like I would hold her back or she would have to take care of me instead of taking care of the stuff that she was getting because she would get big orders. Sometimes she would order it and they would have it delivered to the house. She used to leave me in the house, like locked in the house, and that's why I'm a little scared of darkness sometimes. Yes, I don't like to be in a small room. It has to be open. In the elevator, it's not that bad, but I don't really like it.

A little claustrophobia.

Yes, I'm a little claustrophobic.

Would you sell some of the things at the store, too?

Yes, I would. They would send me over to the counter, but I wouldn't sell the stuff because there were so many people, neighbors—who didn't have a lot of money. We were somewhere in the middle because there were people that were below our economy level. They would come to the

store and they would ask for credit, but they didn't have a job, so my dad wouldn't allow us to give them credit, or my mom. For some people, the closest neighbors that we know that would pay back, yes, we were okay to give them stuff on credit. But these other people that they didn't have a way to pay back, I would give away the stuff; I wouldn't charge them. Some of the neighbors, they would wait and see that I was there at the counter to come over and purchase the stuff because they knew I wasn't going to charge them for anything. My parents soon realized that instead of making profit, we were losing—because my sister was the same way. So they decided to close the store.

My grandpa, he was a farmer and he would bring cantaloupes, watermelons, avocados and all kinds of fruits and vegetables. He would bring them over to the house. My grandma was living right next to us. It's a big piece of land where all my family, my uncles and everybody, would have their own little house right there and we were all together. My grandma would send my sister—she is the number three in the family—and she would do the same thing. She would take big containers and she would go out and walk around the house and try to sell whatever she could. One time my grandma was all excited because she came back within an hour with an empty container. They were avocados. My grandma asked her how much did she make, and she was like, “Nothing. I gave them away. People were hungry. They wanted the stuff, but they didn't have the money to pay for it. And we have it and we can harvest more, and I just give them away.” My grandpa was okay with that, but she wasn't.

My grandpa was another person that sometimes took me with him when my dad wouldn't take me to work with him when he was doing some other things with some other people, like working on a bigger project, so he wouldn't take me with him and he would leave me home. But I would go with my grandpa. We would walk to the land that he had with all the avocados,

oranges, whatever he was harvesting. We would walk even though he had a horse. He would have the horse next to him, walking all the way to his land, because he is like, why is he going to carry you, me or both of us when the three of us can walk and get exercise? We would walk three or four hours to get there. Sometimes we would leave home around eight, get there around noon, eat lunch because my mom and my grandma would pack our lunch, we would get there, eat. His piece of land was next to a river, so we would eat right by the river. Just walk around and see if the fruits and vegetables were still there because he didn't like anybody to steal stuff from him.

But if people would come and ask him for any of the stuff that he had in there, he would give it away. But he wouldn't give you something that you would make a profit out of it. He would give you whatever you could consume, whatever was for personal use, but he wouldn't give you anything to make a profit out of it. He would give it away. He never cared about it. Like avocados, there were people that would come with big containers on pickup trucks trying to buy at a special price. He knew that those people were just ripping people off, giving it so expensive, because they would take it to these places where it was hard for people to get those products fresh, and they would charge three times what he sold it to them for. He wouldn't sell them anything because he didn't like people getting ripped off on those kind of products. He would just rather give it away and just not make any money. He said if he gave the stuff away, the trees would give him more, and it would work for him because, yes, we had all kinds of fruit, even at home. We had mangoes, oranges, all kinds of mangoes.

Lemons.

Yes, lemons, limes. He wouldn't sell any of that even though he collected a lot, but he would give them away because he's like, it's free; we have it right there; it's free; we're not paying for anything. Why do people have to pay for this food, for these kind of products? But my grandma would sell it. If it got into her hands, she would sell it. My mom, too, she would help her. But my sister would give it away for free.

Did you live there your whole life growing up, in the same house and town?

Yes, my whole life over there until I left to come to the U.S. Once I came here it was a completely different life. Yes, I lived over there until seventeen years old.

What was it like to grow up? Did they have public education? Church? Schools? What was the educational system like for you?

It was a public education. Like I said, it was a rural school where some of the teachers would walk hours to get to the school. It was a lot of poor people. Some of my classmates, they didn't have shoes and they would come with the same clothes. Every day they would wash it. After school they would go home, wash it, and wear it the next day. Our uniform was a light blue shirt and blue pants, but in the middle of the week those blue shirts were brown, gray. Some of them didn't even have shoes or school supplies. What I would do is I would take off my shoes and walk barefoot in school and keep my shoes in the backpack that I had so they wouldn't feel bad and I wouldn't feel bad because they didn't have shoes. School supplies—like I said, we didn't have a lot of money, but we had more than other people. From the little store that my mom had, I would take pencils, notepads, and give them away to kids that they didn't have any.

I started school when I was eight years old. I was supposed to start at six, but my dad had the mentality that I had to take care of my brother. He was two years younger than me, so I had

to wait two years for him to be able to go to school. He went to school at the right age, six years old. We skipped kindergarten because according to my dad that was a waste of time. I had to wait two years; I was behind two years in my age compared to all of the kids. But I wasn't protecting him because sometimes we both got beat up. When we would come home that was when I would get my second lecture because I didn't take care of my brother.

I remember the first year I finished first grade and I was so happy that they gave me a certificate. I came home and I told my dad that I was excited that I already completed the first grade and I was going to go to second grade. He grabbed the little certificate and said, "What did you learn?" I told him, "I learned how to read, multiply, adding, and write my name." And he's like, "Basically that's all I needed you to learn. That's it. You're not going to school anymore." But my brother was going to keep going. I don't know what was going on there. The time for enrollment came up. My dad told my mom to go enroll my brother in the second grade, but she wasn't allowed to enroll me in the second grade.

My dad would take me to work, but he wouldn't give me any money. If I did something that they would pay me for when I went to work with him, when we were done with what we were doing and I was helping somebody else and that other person would give me some money, he would keep it. He wouldn't give it to us. I never had any money.

My grandpa came over and told my mom that he was going to pay for the uniforms and the school supplies that I needed, but around my dad's back because my dad wouldn't allow me. I remember my mom got in trouble for that because I was going to keep going to school instead of going to work with him. By then I was already nine, getting close to ten years old. The other thing was that in those areas back in the '80s, if you were between ten, eleven through thirteen or

fourteen years old, the guerrillas in the time would just come and pick you up. Even if you were going to school, they would come to school and take you from your classroom and take you with them.

Do you think your father might have been afraid that that was going to happen to you?

It might have been sort of the way that he would protect us because he knew that I was getting close to that age. When we were in school, sometimes we were in the middle of a class and somebody would yell from outside that the soldiers were outside recruiting. If you were at school and you were fourteen years old...what the soldiers said was if you had the height enough to not drag the assault rifle that they would give you, you were already good to go; that was all they needed. They would take you with them. They trained you. That was on the guerrilla side, but the soldiers were also the same thing. They would come over and if they saw that your height was high enough to go, even if you were in school, they would take you. They didn't care. They would recruit you and take you into the military stations.

You didn't have a choice? You had to go?

There was no choice. It was mandatory back then that everybody who is eighteen and over, after you finish high school, you can go straight to the army or the police, and it's mandatory for two years. Some of the times we were playing with friends—we used to play soccer on the street—and we would see the army trucks driving by or some other days it would be the guerrillas, coming around trying to recruit their own kids to take with them. We would go and hide. Sometimes we would hide in the bushes. We were playing on the street and we would hide in the bushes and not make any moves, any sounds, so they could go away. Or we could go into the bathrooms and hide behind the trash or anywhere we could hide, even on the roof. We would

jump the roofs of the houses and stay there. Either it was the guerrillas or the soldiers coming around trying to recruit you because you were the right age to go and serve the country, for no reason.

What would the teachers do at school?

They wouldn't do anything. They couldn't do anything. They would get punished if they tried to stop them. Nobody could stop them. Nobody could stop the soldiers because they had the authority to do it. Nobody could step up and stand in front of them trying to protect the kids. For the guerrillas, it was with the girls, too.

The girls, too?

Yes. They didn't care whether it was a girl or a boy; they would take them. What they used was some of the neighbors around the community, they would give them the names and lists of kids of the ages that they needed. If they knew there was a family that had three or four kids and the kids were in between the ages that they needed, they would come up to a house and look for you and take you from there.

In a family with six children, were all of you able to avoid that or not?

We were to some point. One day I was already going to high school and I was in a bus. I had my uniform on and my school supplies, my backpack, even a typewriter because we didn't have luxury of what we have right now. I had a big typewriter and I had to carry it with me in a suitcase. They would stop the buses and look for people that they think would be suitable to go to the army. They pulled me out even with the uniform. They removed my backpack and my typewriter; they put it on the side. People were questioning why they pull me off to the side to

put me in one of those army trucks when I was only—I was almost sixteen. They would tell them not to try to stop them. It wasn't only me; there were some other kids that were going to school, some other schools. We thought it was the uniform because according to the law, if you were a student and you could prove that you were studying, they couldn't force you. But some of them, they didn't care. What they did was they made me take off my shirt and gave me an old T-shirt so people wouldn't see me with the uniform standing on the side because they were stopping some other buses, not only that bus, whatever bus was going. They transported people in pickup trucks, open-bed pickup trucks; they transported people like that. They would pull them over to the side and pick people from there and fill up their trucks and take you into the army station.

They took me in. I did some time. And then—

You were actually with the government federal army?

Yes, with the soldiers, with the military.

For a couple of years?

I did thirteen months. I didn't think that was for me. When I was a kid, I used to play with my friends as soldiers and thieves and policemen. But as a real life, I didn't like it. In the time I was there they would send us to small towns to do things, like to blame the guerrillas so we would convince people that the guerrillas were not the right people; that they were not the right side to be on so that they would stay on the military so they can feed back information about the people who were involved with the guerrillas. They would send soldiers to burn houses, steal; what we were required to do was just remove our boots, because the guerrillas, most of them, they don't have complete uniforms. They have the camouflaged uniforms, they have all the equipment, but they don't have the boots. Sometimes they have the jacket, they have the boots, but they don't

have the pants, so they're using regular pants. Stuff like that. We would kind of confuse people that the guerrillas were the ones stealing and burning houses so the people would blame the guerrillas and then the people will be against the guerrillas and so would be on the army side, and vice versa because sometimes the guerrillas would also go to the communities and do the same thing or do a rape or stealing, burning houses, beating people up, and they would go as soldiers. It was easier for them to get because the same people in the high level in the army, it was the same people controlling the guerrillas. There would be a sergeant or a lieutenant, he was also lieutenant on the guerrilla side. They would know when and how the soldiers were moving sometimes. There were so many things that they make you do, things that I didn't agree with.

One time this girl, we had some feedback that her family was involved with the guerrillas. We went and looked for the man in the house; there was a dad and three other guys. They were not there. So if they were in there, we did not have to take anybody. But the sergeant in charge of the group that I was in, he said that we would take the girl. She was like twenty years old. We took her with us, just walking in...it was not a jungle, but it's like a rural area; it's a small street. It was just like a manmade street, a small street. It's not even a street; you can't fit a car.

A dirt path?

Yes, something like that, yes. We had her walking with us, for hours without giving her food or water, nothing, so she would feel weak and start talking, telling us where her family was. We got to an area where we had to rest because it was already dark. I remember this guy; he came over and tried to make her talk, trying to torture her. He grabbed his knife and chopped off one of her

breasts and put it on the fire because we had some fire; he just put it right there like a grilled piece of meat, and he said he was going to eat it.

We had to put rags on the girl trying to stop the bleeding, but it was hard to stop the bleeding. We put some bandages and we wrapped her around. She was still tied up; she couldn't do anything. She lost consciousness from the pain. When she woke up I cut her ropes and she ran away.

But they found out who did it; there were three of us that agreed that we should let her go. She had nothing to do with it. I mean, we were coming from seeing that all the time. We let her go, so we were punished. They took us back and I took her place, and another guy. They hung us in one of the trees upside down with our face covered, with a mask over it; they put a bag over our faces. Their orders were to line up and everybody would come over and hit you with whatever they wanted. If there was somebody that didn't like you, they would just take advantage of the moment until you don't make any moves. They had us there for about maybe ten minutes. It's a very bad experience.

I can't imagine what you were thinking or feeling.

You forget everything. You don't think about it. You forget everything. There's nothing. It's like you black out. You don't think about anything. You forget—not forget, but you don't think about anything. You don't think about your family. You don't think about anybody but the moment that you're there.

After that they made a phone call, and there was a truck, an army truck that came over and picked us up; they whole unit came and picked us up, and they took us back to the base. When we got there they already had a report of what we did; that we let escape one of the

prisoners that we had. They put us in a small cage, like maybe three by three feet. In the army base there was a ramp for the helicopters and all of the big equipment vehicles that they had; they would put those cages in the middle, and at night and the early morning it was so cold, and during the day it was so hot. They would come over early in the morning and throw ice water on you just to wake you up, give you a little bread and that will hold you out the whole day. They would give you a glass of water. Stay there and they would keep you there for days until you learned your lesson.

How did they know you learned your lesson?

They didn't. They didn't. They did whatever they wanted with the three of us. They would socially distance me; they would put us away. They would give us that kind of punishment. And we were lucky because some other people, I don't think they ever came out alive. When you do something like that, you're a traitor. They consider you one of them, so there's no way that you can maybe get away unless they don't catch you. But when we were there it was just us, the three that we agreed that we would let her go. We were guarding; everybody was sleeping.

Did she survive, do you know?

I don't know. We just let her go. We had stopped the bleeding, but it was—she might have.

How did you get out of the army?

That was another thing. I stayed about maybe two or three months after that. One day I was eating dinner. They gave us a big tortilla with beans, rice, cheese and some other thing. It was like a pizza size. You would eat it with your bare hands. There were no plates. Over there we

don't have the facility, the luxury that we have here. Over there they give you whatever you can survive with. They would give you a big tortilla.

One day I was sitting on a corner, just eating the tortilla. It was around nine p.m. I was just eating on the corner. I saw this guy; he wasn't my neighbor, but I knew the guy. Where my house is, is close to a church, and everybody in the afternoon would gather together, a bunch of people just gathered there in the front of the church, just to talk and play. There are some other people selling fruits and what we call our *pupusas*. What do you call the little *pasteles*?

Empanadas?

Empanadas, yes. In the afternoon, like after four, five p.m., people would just come over and gather there and then stay there for a couple of hours and then go back home. I knew this guy from that area because he used to come. His house was maybe half an hour from that place, but he would come over because that was the church of the small town that I lived in. He would come over there, so that's how I knew the guy. We would talk.

That day I saw him coming towards me, and I was like, oh okay, this is a guy that I know. Then I saw his—what do you call?

His patch? The colors?

Yes. He was a sergeant and I saw his—what do you call?

Ranking?

Yes, his ranking.

His stripes.

His stripes, yes. I got up. He's like, "Sit down." I said, "Okay." I told him who I was. I told him who my brother was and my dad. And he's like, "You think I care?" So I was sitting there and he just kicked my tortilla. There were beans and rice all over. He's like, "Get every single one and eat it." I'm like, "What's going on?" He's like, "After what you did, do you think you're going to have it easy here? Now we're just going to make your life miserable for the time left for you to stay here until you are free to go."

I started picking up the beans and putting them back in the tortilla. I had a little bunch already on the tortilla, and then he kicked it again. I got so pissed off. There was another guy sitting there, and his rifle was next to him. I grabbed it. He didn't have anything; he didn't have any arms; he was unarmed. I grabbed the rifle and I put it on his head. He knew I wasn't going to take a shot, and he tried to take it away from me, and I started shooting. When I started shooting he started rolling on the ground. I took three shots that I thought I was going to get him, but I couldn't. But at that moment I was like, this is it; from this point on I can't stay.

After that, I ran. Since I was in uniform, I had everything and I had the rifle with me. I ran to the main entrance because he ran over to his locker to get his equipment. But by the time he ran over, I went the other way, towards the exit. I got to the front gate and I told the guys that I needed to go outside, and they wouldn't let me out. I put the rifle on the guy's head and I told him that I needed to leave. He opened the gate and I got out. I got to the middle of the street and I stopped a car. I told the driver to take me away from there. When I got closer to my house, I told him just to drop me off, before I got to the house.

But by the time I got to the house, the house was already surrounded by soldiers and cars. They were already looking for me. They accused me of trying to kill a superior and escaping

from the military base. I was just a traitor, so I was against the Salvadorian flag; I was not considered part of the honorable people.

I went to my neighbor's house and I told the little kid in the house to go get my brother to get me some clothes and—

Which little kid?

The neighbor's kid. The brother of—remember the neighbors across the street?

The artist? Yes.

Yes. His brother was my same age. I told him to go get my brother to get me some clothes. I was hiding in the house. Somehow, they found out that I was hiding there. I don't know if they saw my brother trying to get some clothes; they followed him. My neighbor, she was like, "They're coming for you. They already know you're here."

I went to the restroom. The restrooms that were there were basically a hole. It has a little cement toilet seat, but it's big enough that you can fit in there. I jump in it and I got inside the hole, with crap all over to my knees, and I was hiding in there until they came over. I stayed there for two hours.

After that it wasn't safe to come back to my house, so I told my mom that I was going to go to Guatemala. I had my aunt; she lived there. I took a bus and I went to Guatemala. I stayed there, but by then my mom was already talking to my uncle who happens to live in L.A. He sent her some money so that she could give it to me so we could get somebody who could guide me and bring me all the way here. I was two weeks in Guatemala and then I came back to El

Salvador to get the money and go pay the guy; they call him a *coyote*. We pay the guy; it was maybe a thousand dollars back then. It wasn't much.

One thousand dollars?

One thousand dollars. Back then we had *colones*; we had our own money, which we don't have anymore.

Now it's the dollar.

Now they dollarize it; it's same as here. But people don't make as much as we make here, and everything is the same price as here. You go to the store and you pay the same over here; you pay it over there. But people over there, a regular wage per day is ten dollars, but you spend two dollars in transportation, two dollars in meals, so you end up with five dollars a day.

We paid the guy to bring me across to Guatemala and bring me into Mexico and finally come over to the United States.

What was it like in Mexico?

It was tough.

Exactly how old were you when this was all happening?

I was seventeen, because they took me in the army when I was almost sixteen.

You were growing up fast.

Getting too much into the real life at an early age.

We went there. Then we went to this small town called *Ciudad Arce*. This guy took us there. We all meet in the house. We paid him. My dad was with me. But I didn't have the age; I didn't have my ID. I was underage, so I couldn't cross the border without my dad. That was on a Wednesday, I remember, because Thursday is a free day that they do in Guatemala and El Salvador when they have an open border so people can come across and exchange goods, all kinds of clothes; all kinds of stuff. People from Guatemala come to El Salvador, just right there on the border. The guy said he was going to charge me more because we were going to have spend one night in El Salvador waiting after we tried to go across. There were eleven people in the group that he was guiding that he had with him. Everybody was able to come into Guatemala, but I wasn't because I didn't a passport and I didn't have my ID. That's the first thing they tell you that when you're going to make a trip to go to the United States, you don't have to bring anything; no identification, nothing, because they can't find out where you're from. I didn't have anything with me.

My dad, he left me at the house where we met, but since he wasn't with me, I couldn't cross. The guy said he was going to charge me more because we were going to have to spend a night in El Salvador while the other people were waiting with the other guy, with a helper, his assistant or whatever you want to call it, in Guatemala already with the other group of people. I was still in El Salvador, right there at the border.

We waited a night. We didn't even sleep. We didn't go to a motel; we stayed right there at the border. There's a lot of people there. It's a twenty-four-hour thing. We stayed there. The following morning, at six o'clock in the morning, they opened the gate and people are free to go back and forth, so that's when I was able to cross into Guatemala.

Once we got over to Guatemala, we come to a city, the closest city to El Salvador, but from there they take you around to the jungle. I remember in the bus that we were riding one day, there were people in Guatemala, though they speak Spanish, there were people that didn't speak Spanish, and they look at you weird because the way you're dressed is not the same way the dress, because it's like Indigenous. It was nice to see people that they didn't speak—even there they didn't speak the same language and we couldn't communicate with them. They bring you around those areas to come to Mexico.

Then in Mexico, when you come into Mexico, these people, they tell you so many things that they make you frightened of anything, of people. They tell you not to talk to anybody, not to get in contact with anybody, because what they're doing is trying to keep you with them so you wouldn't get away. They charge you some money to cross you to Guatemala and Mexico, but once you get to the border to Mexico and the United States, they sell you for more; that way you get more value. They sell you like goods. That's why they call them *polleros* because they treat you like a little chicken, like a little chick. That's how they sell you to other people who are going to bring you across the border.

But in Mexico, they keep you in small motels, no A/C, nothing. They just keep you in a room, maybe a ten-by-ten size room, and they keep thirty, forty people in there. They lock you in and they bring you food. Then they take you out a group at a time, put you in a bus, and transport you to a different city where they all meet together.

I remember when I was in Mexicali, I was the last one getting in the bus; everybody was already in the bus. There was this police that came over and they asked me where I was from? What they tell you is you have to tell them you're from Mexico; you can't tell them you're from

Central America because automatically you're going to jail. They called me out and they were asking me questions.

Then this lady, on the whole trip she was always next to me because I had some money left and I would buy stuff, and she would be like, "Can I have some? Can I have some?" I would always feed her. But we were not allowed. I would escape; I would try to find a way to get out of the room and go buy food, because they kept us there for days. It's not just one day; they keep you there for days. I would find out a way to go out and buy food, or tell somebody to buy food for us. One time I told the guy at the front counter to go order tacos and I give him the money. He brought a big bag of tacos, so we all ate tacos that day.

At the bus station right there, when she saw that I was pulled to the side by the police, she came out of bus asking what was going on. They found out that there was somebody else, so they caught her. They asked her who else was in the bus, so she gave everybody up.

They took me to a room. Since she knew me, she called my name. They accused me of being the one taking a group of people across. I said, "I'm not the one. I'm one of them." But they wouldn't believe it. So, they put me in a room and they asked me to agree on whatever they were going to say. They made me sign papers. They took my fingerprints. They told me that they were going to take me a picture in front of the table with handcuffs. They were going to put money, some weapons and drugs on the table, and I have to agree to take a picture at the table, like me being the one responsible for all of that. They just needed somebody to look good with the public, saying that they captured somebody who was trafficking with all that stuff. I had no choice, so I sat on the table. The whole group, there were ten people there in the room. But they would let us go if I agreed to do that. They sat me there. There were a bunch of reporters trying

to make questions, and they told me not to answer any questions. Just to stay there, take the picture, and they would take me back to jail, to the cell where we were. At midnight they came over and let us out.

Were you worried about trusting that they would really let you loose?

I had no choice. After being behind bars in Mexico, I had no choice. But the other group of people, the guy who was guiding us, bringing us over, he left with the other group they had because ten of us were the people coming together from El Salvador. Then he met some other group of people that were waiting for him, to bring them all together. The rest of the people that he had—he took off on the bus and he left us there.

There I was with ten other people and I didn't know where I was. No money because by then we didn't have any money. I was able to—it came up to my mind that I could take a taxi and tell him to take me back to the motel where they had us. I told the guy, "I don't know the name; I don't know the street; I don't know the address. All I know is there was a big store. It's called *Tres Hermanos*, Three Brothers, and they sell jeans, boots; all cowboy stuff over there." I remember seeing that store from the window of the room that we were in. I told this guy, "I know this store, so once we get there I know where the motel is." And he knew where it was.

He drove us. We were in the trunk, six people in the backseat, in the front seat, wherever we could fit. It was a small car and he had to fit ten people in the little car. He took us to the motel.

I went to the front desk, and the guy knew me because he was the one that I asked to go get some tacos for us. He knew me and I told him what happened. He's like, "There's nothing

we can do, man. We can't let you stay here." If I didn't have any money. I didn't have any money.

I called my uncle who was in L.A. waiting for me. I told him that I was there and that I needed money. He told me that he wasn't an ATM that I could just call and ask for money. But he asked me how much I needed. I said, "Well, at least a hundred dollars. Two hundred? Five hundred?" He's like, "What? You're crazy. I can't give you that money."

There was his mother-in-law. She didn't know me. She didn't know who I was.

Zoilita?

Yes. Her name was Zoila. She had probably seen me over there. She knew my mom, but she never met me in her life. She had been here maybe thirty, forty years. She is the one who was giving him the money, lending him the money to pay for my transportation all the way to California. He went over and talked to her, and she gave him five hundred dollars.

I called him back because I told him I was going to call him the following day because that day he said he didn't have any money. But I told the guy at the front counter of the motel that I was going to try to get the money. He asked me for the information for my uncle, and they had called him to find out if he was actually waiting for me. But after that I called him to tell him that I needed the money to pay. He's like, "I can help you and you can try to see how you can survive on your own, not with other people, not with a group a people. Because what are you going to get from those people?" I wasn't going to get anything because I didn't even know where to go.

The guy from the motel called one of his friends and told him that there was a group of Salvadoran people in his motel that they needed to keep going on their way to California. He came over and he asked every one of us, take information of the relatives that we had in California waiting for us. He made a list. He called everybody just to make sure that we actually have somebody who was going to pay for us once we cross the border.

This other guy would take us back. He took us on a big train they called The Beast; that train that comes all across Mexico, and just full of people. It transports goods and all of that.

It's the one where people ride on the top?

Yes.

Okay, I saw the movie The Beast, right?

Yes. That's what it's called. But the train doesn't stop, so you have to board the train while it's in motion.

How fast is it going when you board?

It has to slow down in the small towns because there's people crossing, so it has to slow down, and they know the areas when it slows down the most. You just try to jump on the train. We all made it. We made it in the train. There's no seats. There's just the boxes.

Boxcars.

Yes. They're just there. Some of them are empty because a lot of people just want to be outside because if you're outside you can grab food from people that help you along the way. When the train slows down, there are people that are giving food away, and that's why most of the people

that know how it works sit outside...I didn't know how it worked. They tried to be outside trying to catch food so they can eat because we don't have anything.

That day I was just in the car and I was in the corner. I was tired and I fell asleep. When I woke up I was all wet, and I thought it was water from some other cars in the train. No. We were at the area where the bathrooms were and they were filled up, so when the train would move, they overflowed. I had this stuff all over me.

In one of these big towns where it slowed down, because the smell was so bad, we all agreed that I was going to get out and go find somehow to wash my clothes because we didn't have water in there. We stopped there. We got off the train, and they wouldn't let me go. All of the people that were coming with me, they wouldn't let me go on my own. I just wanted to get away from them, too, because my uncle said he wouldn't help me if I was trying to help these other people.

He would or would not help you?

He would not help me.

You're still in this same group of people.

I was in the same group.

But you're knowing that he's not going to help you out.

He's not going to help me. But I was trying to get away from them because he sent me the money to pay that day at the motel. I didn't have any identification. I didn't have anything on me. I had to trust the guy. I told him that my uncle was going to send me some money, and he

was going to send it under his name so he could go to Western Union. There was a Western Union there at the big store, the reference point that I had.

Tres Hermanos?

Yes. They had a Western Union there. I told the guy, “My uncle is going to send you some money.” I asked him his name and gave it to my uncle, so he sent him three hundred dollars. He was like, “I have five hundred, but I’m going to send you three hundred dollars so you can pay that night and get out of there and get your way either back to El Salvador or” –at that point he said that he didn’t want to help me anymore because he didn’t want to be sending me money every time I needed it because I didn’t have anything on me. We paid that guy. It was three hundred dollars, and he only gave me a hundred and fifty because he charged me the rest. We had no choice but to let him give us whatever he wanted. He gave me a hundred and fifty in Mexican money.

But the guy who was going to take us and try to bring us across the border, he paid the night of the hotel that we had so I would have some money on me. They knew I had some money. A hundred and fifty dollars, it wasn’t much, but at that moment it was a lot because it would help us get some food.

You’re still with the other ten people?

Yes. They wouldn’t let me go. I told them that I had to get out of the train so I could go wash or try to buy some clothes. At the beginning you start with a backpack. You have an extra shirt and extra pants. But on the way here you throw everything away. I ended up with the same clothes that I left with. I couldn’t buy anything. The train slowed down I got off and everybody jumped. They jumped off the train. They were already in the train. The guy that was bringing us, he was

so pissed off because everybody jumped off the train. He's like, "What do you have that these people follow you?" I told them, "Hey, you guys keep going." I knew where the train was and I knew I could save some money if I could jump back on the next train and try to make it on my own, but they followed me anyways.

We got to a house and they helped us. They let me wash my clothes and they gave us food. We saw that there were a lot of houses, but when we got off the train, there were only two houses. I don't know how we saw a lot of houses and then all of a sudden we only saw two houses. We asked them when the next train was going to go by, and they're like, "Oh, it takes days."

Because you're in the middle of rural Mexico.

In the desert, right?

Yes, it was actually a desert. They're like, "But there's a road hours away from here." We just looked at them like, "Hours away?" He's like, "Yes, it will take you five hours to get there, walking. And we advise you to walk at night because during the day you're not going to survive because it's too hot."

They were feeding us the whole day. I saw that they had a truck parked in the back. I asked one of the kids that were playing around if the truck was good. He was like, "Yes, my dad uses it." I'm like, okay. I told them what we can do; we're not going to walk because we're not going to make it. The lady told us that it would take like five hours, but we have to calculate the time to get there because there was only one bus that goes by that road per day. She's like, "If you make it there and the bus has already gone by, you're not going to survive because it's too

hot. You're not going to have supplies to survive. You're not going to have water because you have probably already drunk all the water that you're going to carry with you on the way there."

I waited until it got dark. I disappeared from them. I left them in the patio where we were. I walked around the house and I got inside the truck, but I couldn't find keys in it. I don't know how... In El Salvador there was a guy who taught me how to drive, and one day he lost the keys for the truck that he was teaching me how to drive, and I learned how to hotwire; he taught me how to do it, but that was only once. That day I was like, maybe I can do it. I went under it to make sure that the steering wheel wasn't locked. I started it up.

I told them, "As soon as you hear the engine start, run, because whoever stays behind, I'm not stopping." I started up, they came around the house, they jumped in the truck, and I drove. It took like thirty minutes to get to the place. But I had told them that I was feeling so bad with what we were doing by the truck that they were going to find it by the area where the bus was going to go by and then left them fifty dollars. I left them fifty dollars in Mexican money; I left them a bunch of money, but it was maybe about fifty dollars. We just told them that we were sorry that they helped us and we were doing that on top of the help that they gave us, but that we had no choice but to try to make it.

We got there early because the bus was going by at eleven a.m. They even have the time; these people know what time the bus is going to go by, and so they told us eleven a.m. We got there around five a.m. We were also calculating the time that if they walked from the house to the place where we were going to be at. We had to be gone by the time they get there because it probably wasn't going to be a pleasant moment to meet them back after we stole their truck. We got there and the bus wouldn't go by. I drove back the truck about half an hour; I drove it back

into the desert getting it close to where we came from so they would find the truck, but they wouldn't find us. I was trying to make some time.

We got there and stayed there and waited for the bus. The bus wouldn't come by. I remember I was getting so weak that I found a bush. It was a small bush. I just got under it as much as I could trying to get some shade because it was too hot. This lady, the one that gave me up at the bus stop, she came over and I told her that I couldn't get up. She lifted me; she picked me up. She saw something, like a reflection of the bus windshield with the sun, and she was like, "The bus is coming." I'm like, "There's no bus coming by. Just leave me here. Just keep walking. Just take the road down. This is where the bus is going to go. So wherever the bus meets you, just stand in the middle of the road and the bus is going to have to stop." That's how we were going to do it because it wasn't a bus stop. We had to stand in the middle of the street so the bus would be forced to stop and pick us up. I still had a hundred dollars so we could pay the bus to take us out of there.

I remember she picked me up. I was so weak and she picked me up. We stopped the bus. We got on the bus. Even the bus driver already knows that they're picking up people on the road. They have water hiding in the compartments, and they gave us water. We took the bus on the way to Tijuana.

In Tijuana, the one thing I never forgot was the phone numbers; they gave us phone numbers in case we get lost.

What were the phone numbers?

The guy who was bringing us from El Salvador, he gave us three phone numbers. He was like, "If you get displaced, if you get lost, call this number." He gave us those three numbers.

Were those numbers for the United States?

No, for Tijuana. We were at the motel after they left on the bus because they pulled me back; they took us to jail. He kept going, but before he had given us the numbers. But it was too soon, because they were still on the road, for me to call the number and tell them that we were staying here. He left us behind, so we had to get somebody else to bring us across.

When we jumped off the train, the guy who was bringing us over, he didn't jump. He just let us go because he wasn't going to wait for us. It was just somebody who was trying to make some money out of us.

When we got to Tijuana, I called the number and he was already there. He had some people there with the other group of the people that he left us. He was in Tijuana, and I told him that we had made it to Tijuana. He couldn't believe that we had made it, and all together. He is like, "I can't believe it, but you're here, so let's keep going."

He picked us up and he took us to Tijuana. He told us that we had to wait. He was going to go because he was legal; he had a passport; he had a green card, so he could go across the border. We were staying in like a bus station that one side is Tijuana and the other side is the United States. You have to go with these roll bars.

A turnstile.

Yes. He went across. Twenty minutes went by and I didn't see him coming back for us, because he told us to wait. When I didn't see he was coming back for us, I don't know how I got up and I started walking towards the officer, and he was helping somebody else, so I don't know how he got so blind that I was standing next to this other guy. He opened the gate and I was able to go

across at the same time. I even pushed a guy. I remember he said something because I pushed him because that was my only moment of making it because otherwise, he would have to ask me for my identification and I didn't have any.

When I went across, I didn't know I was already in the United States. I didn't know. This lady, the one that already gave me up once, she saw me on the other side and she started calling my name. The police and the immigration officers, they came over to her and they asked her who she was and who she was with. She said that she was me. I said, "She's not with me. We're just trying to make it across."

They went and caught me and put me in handcuffs again and took me back to Mexico, to the other side. But they took us to the public restrooms. There was this officer that came over. He's like, "Do you have anybody waiting for you on the other side?" We're like, "Yes." He was like, "Can you provide us the name and a number of the people waiting for you? If you can prove that you have somebody on the other side, we can put you across. We can take you to the other side. But it has to be guaranteed that they're waiting for you and they're going to pay for you."

They called my uncle again. I was a headache for him because they called him again, some other people, to tell him that they have me. Maybe his thoughts were that they were going to ask for ransom once they had me there and get the money from him and not delivering me over to where I was coming to. They called him in the middle of the night. They asked him if he was waiting for me and if he had the money to pay. Once I get delivered to Los Angeles, he had to come up with some more money besides the money he paid. This guy, he was only in charge to bring us to Tijuana. From Tijuana across the border; that was somebody else. He would sell me to these other people, but he couldn't make money out of us because we got caught.

Immigration had us all there; they asked us if we had people waiting for us. We gave them the information. They called my uncle in the middle of the night. He's like, good to go to come here. They called other people's relatives or anybody that was waiting for them. They were putting us aside so that we all could prove that there were people in the United States that were waiting for us. The police gave them official vehicles; they put us in the trunk and they took us around to the gate where they could go out, and they brought us into San Diego.

The police did?

Whoever they were. Whoever they were, they were in official vehicles and they put us in the trunk because they had those Ford Crown Victorias. Yes, they put us in the trunk. They put six of us in a trunk. They just roll us in and we had to make room for the rest. They bring us across. They drove for about fifteen minutes. We were in San Diego.

And there, we came to this house that was all dark; we couldn't see. They opened the door and we started walking in and we thought it was an empty house. Nah. They had like three hundred people there, on the ground, on the floor, sleeping there, people that were waiting to get in touch with people in whatever part of the United States they were coming to. They were trying to prove that they were going to get paid.

Did you have to compensate the police or whoever they were to put you in the car?

They only called my uncle. They called my uncle to verify. Whatever the deal they had with the people in the house—they were some other people. Probably they were like, okay, we've got these guys; they already proved there's somebody waiting for them, so they would sell me maybe to them so these other people would bring us across the immigration stations. San Luis Obispo, San Clemente; that's the immigration station right there that it's hard to cross. You are

already in the U.S., but that station right there is where they stop people that had already come from Tijuana into the United States.

There, from San Diego, they came in those passenger vans, in Chevrolet vans with no seats, and they would put thirty people in the van. They make you fold your legs and keep them like this. You can't do anything. If you need to use the restroom, forget it. They put you in those vans. They fit thirty people in those vans. They come over to the hill and you can see the station, the immigration station right there. You can see it and they have the exact time that they're going to do the switch of the officers, and they take those two minutes to come across and bring all the people. I don't know how they are synchronized with the time. They drive you down in a van. They come down to the road. They make it right in between the time they're going to do the switch. They have one gate open. One gate is open because they are doing the switch, and they're not checking anybody; they're just letting anybody through. That's how they bring you in.

They drove us from San Clemente to Los Angeles; it was over three hours. I remember that when we got there, they just pulled us out, like a bag, because you can't move your legs. Your legs are numb and you can't move. I remember they were just pulling people like bags and throwing them on the ground. People wait for you to make your legs respond. My legs were so numb that I couldn't get up. It took me hours to bring them back, to have motion in them. They brought us into this house that was already in L.A. But still I had no idea where I was. If I knew where I was, I could have just walked over to my uncle's place and he would have saved some money.

How many days or weeks was this whole process from the minute you quit the army?

From the day I quit, I escaped the army, to the day that I came to Los Angeles, it was forty-one days.

Forty-one harrowing days, it sounds like, exhausting.

Forty-one days and thirty-something days that I wasn't able to take a shower every day, so we smelled bad. But when they bring you over to the house in L.A. I remember it was at 41st and Broadway in L.A. It was a small house. It looked like an abandoned house, weeds all over on the outside. They bring you in and they take off your clothes. They just leave you in underwear. Males and women that are there, you're in the same room in the same house, no clothes, no pants and shirts. They lock you in. From there they start making phone calls so they can go deliver you, so they can take you and deliver you like a pizza. They take you one at a time and they meet your family. That's the first time that you see your family; that they're waiting for you.

Then they give you clothes when they go to deliver you?

Oh yes. Once they get in touch with, in my case, my uncle, once they got in contact with him and he said that he had the money and he was waiting for me, he would drive me up to his place. That was April 23rd, 1990, on a Wednesday, I got there. He was working. His car happened to be stolen the night before because he lived in Los Angeles in a very hard area where you couldn't leave your stereo in the car.

They would steal it out.

They would steal it and they would steal anything you have, anything of value that you have in the car, even your whole car. His car was an easy car to open. You could open it with a pair of scissors and start it up; that's how easy that car was. His wife and my cousin, they were waiting

for me on that Wednesday that I arrived. It was raining. It was around ten a.m. I got there. The first thing that my uncle's wife said was, "Oh, you stink so bad. Let me take you in and go take a shower and put some of his clothes. Whatever you can find there that can fit you, just use it." She said that. One day I didn't notice that—I saw a pair a jeans and they fit me. I put them on. This was a couple of months after I was already going to school.

Going to school?

Yes.

Where?

It was called Metro Skills Center. I was in Los Angeles. I was going to take ESL classes. I was walking and she was coming back from work. She cleaned houses. I remember I saw her coming from the bus stop. I saw her coming out of the bus and walking towards the way I was coming. The first thing she said was, "Hey, those are my pants. Why do you have them on?" I didn't know those were her jeans. They fit me. Oh, that day.

I had a friend who had come a couple of months before me.

Which one?

Roberto. He had been here just a couple of months, but he had more knowledge of L.A., a little more knowledge of L.A. than me. I was just brand-new. One day after I arrived to my uncle's place which was like a studio apartment that he had. When he came from work, he came around six p.m. He was riding the bus because his car had been stolen. He had a very small apartment; it was like a studio that the bed would come down from the wall. I didn't even know that there was a bed. I was in the living room and I asked him where was I going to sleep? He was like, "Where

you're sitting." A small couch. "You're sleeping there." And I'm like, "Where are you going to sleep?" He pulled down the bed, and that was the kitchen right there. One day I went out. I memorized the building address and the apartment number.

What was it?

859 New Hampshire, right there on Vermont and Ninth Street. I memorized the address and the apartment number. I came out and I was counting the blocks. I remember I went to McDonald's. From Ninth Street I walked all the way on Vermont all the way up to Third Street where there was this McDonald's that I had seen when these guys brought me in. I walked up and I just wanted to get out because I was just in the apartment by myself all day. That was two weeks after I had arrived. I walked up to McDonald's. My uncle had given me twenty dollars because if I needed to go around—there is a big market right there called Liborio Market, which is right on the corner. He's like, "Everybody speaks Spanish there. You don't have to worry about it. You just walk up to the store, and you can buy anything you want." I'm like, okay.

Like the California version of Cardenas.

Yes. I got there. Instead of going there, I'm like, eh, I just want to walk. I walked up the street. I walked for about half an hour. I got to the McDonald's. I ate. That was the first time I tried the Big Mac, and ever since I don't change the Big Mac; I don't try anything else. Like at Burger King, the Whopper is the one that I tried, I stick with it. Every time I go to Burger King, I eat the Whopper. McDonald's, I always eat the Big Mac; I don't eat anything else.

I ate. I remember there was this guy, a Black guy, who helped me. I couldn't tell him what I wanted. I was like, okay, so I just pointed at the screen that he had on the wall. I remember he said three something, so I gave him five dollars. I ate. I started walking down to

859 New Hampshire. I went by. I passed the street. I passed Ninth Street and Vermont. I kept going. I passed Olympic and I got to Pico. When I got there, I was like, huh?

Pico?

Pico Boulevard, yes. I was just walking. My uncle gave me his phone number, his work phone number. He worked in the parking company and he worked at the hospital booth where the parking entrance was, so he would charge people. He had his own phone line there and gave me his number. I was good at memorizing numbers. Now I don't even know my home phone number. I called him and said, "Hey, I came out for a walk. I went to McDonald's and I came back down and I don't know where I am." He said that I was stupid; I was dumb. He was with people there when I called him. He's like, "I can't believe you can't make it back to where we live." I said, "I don't know where I am." He told me to look at one side and I told him what I was looking at. He's like, "Now the other side, no, turn around, keep walking down the street and then you're going to find Ninth Street. When you get to Ninth Street, make a left."

I got there and locked myself in and I didn't want to go. I was so afraid that I was going to get lost again.

Before we go on to what happened next, with your uncle, was he on your mother's or your father's side of the family?

It's my mom's side.

How long had he been in the United States?

He's been in the United States since the early '80s.

He had been here maybe ten years or less.

Over ten years, yes.

At the time, how aware of—you're being dragged into military—but how aware were young people of why this turmoil was happening in El Salvador?

Who him or...

You. For you, the politics of it.

Yes, what was happening? Did you know why the guerrilla and the army were fighting?

Back then I didn't have—when they bring you in, they brainwashed you and they tell you supposedly right from wrong; that the military are the right side and the guerrillas are the bad side and that they're just trying to destroy the army because they don't agree with their beliefs.

What beliefs?

To protect people, serve and protect, which they don't do. They just more harass.

But you didn't have any real idea of what they were fighting over, the two sides?

Not then. Not then.

You were just a kid.

I was just a kid.

And you were caught in the middle of them each wanting you for manpower, right?

Correct. No, I had no idea, the reason why there were two sides of the political. There were guerrillas and there were soldiers. I had no idea what was going on.

And both were bad for you because you were a kid; you didn't want to fight.

If I had the knowledge, if I knew what I know now, the reason why they were fighting, I would go towards the guerrilla side because rich people have always been ones controlling the army; paid the high-ranked people in the army to protect them. What they do is, if they see a family with a big piece of land and they want it and these people don't want to sell it, they come and take it away. They kill them. They take it away so the rich people get richer and the poor people always—not meaning poor people, but rural people who don't have any idea of what they have. But there are these people that know they can do a lot more with what these people have, but they can have it, so they steal it. This group of people, that's how they started it; putting themselves against the army because the army was contributing to take the land out of the *campesinos*, the rural people who were there. They would take it away and leave them with nothing. They were just trying to protect themselves, so that's how they got the others and started forming groups of people against the army. It makes no sense. People were just trying to defend themselves from these people taking what they own, what they had inherited from their grandparents, great-grandparents. They had it and would harvest corn, rice; all kinds of stuff that they could work with. These other people, they just wanted to build something there, like factories. Now it's full of factories, El Salvador.

I remember there was a huge plantation of sugarcane. The last time we went, you don't see that. There's nothing. There's just factories, Disney factories over there where they make all the clothes and all the stuff that they sell here; it's over there, Nike and a lot of factories. That's why they wanted those pieces of land. But that's how everything started, stealing from the people who will let them steal from them.

At what point did you begin to be aware of what the politics were?

After I got here to the United States, I started thinking and started seeing more news, not reading. She knows I don't like reading. Yes, it would start by something you read and then something you hear. Some of the stories you hear from other people that have been—once you get here to California, you start meeting people that you probably saw over there. One of my friends in California, he only has one eye. He was sort of like a captain level in the guerrillas. We got there and he knew who I was related to because my friend, the one who died already—

Which one?

Manuel. It was his friend. We all got together. After we started talking he started coming out that he had power in the guerrillas. Then my friend who was in the army said, “We’re here; we’re nobody here.” He was telling me that his family got killed and their land was taken away and they couldn’t recover it, so he ended up with nothing after they had a lot. They had cows. They had a bunch of animals that they would raise, and they lost them all. They lost everything. That’s how he started it. On his side there were people that had had a big economy level high, so they would be respected by the poor people that were following them. The poor people were fighting against the government because these people with land would give them jobs and keep them employed, but the rich people would just get big contractors, companies that would come and do the job, and they would leave these people without a job. That’s how these people started getting together and started following them. A lot of these people, also, they didn’t have education, so anything you tell them they would believe you. They told them that if they would fight against the government, they were promised land as compensation for their service, but that never happened. They were just fighting.

When I was over there, I had a little knowledge that that was going on after the stuff that we had done. It wasn't my life. That wasn't for me. But if it would have been something, maybe if I would have been in the police area, it would have been different than the army because the army does a lot of crazy stuff.

You came to the United States to escape persecution. You probably would have been executed or something. Am I wrong to say that? Something horrible would have happened to you.

It was hard because I have so many friends that were killed either by the guerrillas. Some of them disappeared because they went into the guerrilla side and others went into the army, they went into the police, and we never saw each other.

You were just trying to survive.

Yes.

By choosing a side.

I didn't choose a side.

Yes, without choosing. You were trying to survive.

Yes.

When you came to the United States, you felt safe immediately with your uncle? Did you feel like you could let your guard down right away? When did you feel like this was going to become home?

I felt free because I could walk, I could go anywhere, and I saw in the time that he would take me around, and some other friends that I had here that I had there already had a car and a job, they would come pick me up and drive me around. It was so much difference than the life that I had over there.

My uncle's wife, she worked with this lady that had a condominium in Westwood and she had a house in Beverly Hills and in Marina del Rey; she had three houses. One day she brought me to the building where she was cleaning her condominium. She didn't live there, but she would go there once a week to clean it. She brought me in because she had talked to the guy in the valet parking that I had just come and I was here and looking for a job. She brought me in. The guy brought me into this office and they gave me an interview. I didn't speak much English, but hi and goodbye; that was it. He knew that I didn't speak English. He brought me into his boss's office and they were just speaking in English and I had no idea. They said they were going to call me to come over and try to work there in valet service. They never called me. I'm still waiting for their phone call; they never called me.

That lady, Linda, she came over because I had to wait for her. I had to wait for my uncle's wife because I didn't know my way back on the bus, so I had to wait for her. I just sat there on the sidewalk. I remember that she came down with Linda looking for me. She thought I was already working. I wasn't. I was sitting on the sidewalk. She came down and she introduced me to Linda. She was a teacher and she was teaching Spanish, but through the book. She didn't speak Spanish. She spoke very, very little Spanish, but she would read it because she was supposedly teaching Spanish to her kids because she was a teacher. She came down. She introduced me to her. She said that she had never given her a ride home, and that day she offered to drive us home. She drove from Westwood all the way to Los Angeles just to drop us off.

The next day she was going to the house in Beverly Hills. She was right there on Camden Street and Olympic. I don't know what she told her on the phone because she called her later on that day. The day that she dropped us off, after she dropped us off, she called her and I don't know what she told her. The next day she is like, "You're coming with me. We're going to Linda's house in Beverly Hills." I said, "Okay." Maybe she wanted help sweeping or do some cleaning there.

She took me there. Linda was there. She was trying to tell me in Spanish that she had a job for me. I'm like, okay. She asked me how much I wanted to make. I didn't know. I was coming from making maybe a dollar a day to here where I heard that minimum wage was five, six dollars. She needed a fence. It had a lot of those vines that grow along the wall. She wanted me to do trimming. She could have hired somebody else. A gardener could do it in half an hour.

She asked me what tools I needed. She didn't have anything. I didn't know what to use. She took me to a store; it was like a Home Depot store. She was just walking around, asking questions, what she needed to trim those leaves along the wall. She was given some pliers, those big pliers; it was like electrical saw, but she didn't get the power cord. I didn't know I needed a power cord, so we didn't have a power cord long enough to get to the fence. I was just using the clippers. That was around...past noon...around one, so my uncle's wife was already done with the house. We came over and I spent two hours there just chopping weeds. I wasn't going to do much with the clippers.

She called me and she asked me how much I was going to charge. I said, "Nothing." She's like, "No. You have to make money." And I said, "Nothing, don't worry." My uncle's wife started talking to her. She started telling her that I had just come here and I was going to school

trying to learn English. She told her to tell me to keep going to school. She came up with two hundred dollars. I'm like, "Two hundred dollars? I only worked maybe three hours trimming leaves along the wall." She gave me two hundred dollars and she's like, "You come back and finish that tomorrow." Another two hundred dollars.

My uncle's wife was like, "You make more than me and you didn't do anything. I only made seventy dollars cleaning the whole house. Two hundred dollars for not doing anything."

The following day I woke up, took a shower, took the bus, and I asked my uncle wife's, "Hey, where do I get off?" She's like, "Get off once you pass Roberson Boulevard; the next stop is going to be Camden." I didn't know where it was, so I told the driver. I wrote it down. I told him I needed that stop. I was just standing there by the bus driver. I didn't move. There were seats available, but I didn't move. I just stood there all the way there. It was over an hour.

I got there the first day around eight a.m. I got there and she was there waiting for me. She was so happy to see me. I was like, oh, that's weird. I went to the storage room where I left the tools. Her husband was there and she had a son and a daughter. The girl was an architect and the guy was—I don't remember what he was—but the husband was an attorney. The whole family was there. I just went around the driveway, and she was like, "No, no, no. Come inside." She called me in and people were trying to talk to me in Spanish as much as they could.

She had just adopted a little kid. She said that they wanted a kid and she went to an adoption place, like a foster parent. She had this kid who was two years old; his name was Tyler. He would come and play with me with a little soccer ball. She asked me if I knew how to play soccer. I said, "Yes." She said, "Teach him." I'm like, "I came to work on the fence." She said,

“No worries. Play with the kid for about an hour.” I entertained the kid, just playing. Then the kid fell asleep. Okay, now it’s time for me to go to work.

She was like, “Are you hungry?” And I’m like, “No.” Then she took me to a restaurant on Rodeo Drive. She would call the chef because she knew the chef. I don’t know how she was related to these people. She called the chef, and the chef happened to be a Mexican guy. She told him to ask me what I wanted. He brought me a big plate with everything I asked. She is like, “Don’t worry about it. Eat and then go to work.” It was around noon; it was a brunch. We got to the place around noon, and I started doing another two hours there, and then she gave me another two hundred dollars. She said, “Come back tomorrow.” I was like, I can’t do that; that was too much money.

From that place that’s when I discovered that coming from El Salvador and knowing that this was going to be the right place for me. I’m like, if I’m going to be making this much money, in six months I can have enough money to buy me a big rig, a truck, go back to El Salvador, and I know I can make a living out of that with a truck. But I only worked there for maybe a week.

You had the hope of going back still.

Yes, I did. That was my plan: Make some money, save some money, and go over there and start up a business.

You thought you could go back and be safe.

Yes. I didn’t think I was going to last as much as I have been here. It’s been over thirty years.

The United States was a sanctuary temporarily. Did you go back?

I went back to El Salvador three years after I came. I was able to apply for asylum. It was TPS, temporary protection status. Because of the situation that I left El Salvador, the reason why I left El Salvador helped me apply for it and qualify for the program. Back then they would give you a permit. You would have to have some sort of emergency and prove that you had an emergency. What we did here—I don't know if you've heard of MacArthur Park in L.A. That's a place where you can become a resident the same day you arrive from any country in the world. You go there and walk around with your picture. You give the picture to one of the guys there and they charge you fifty dollars, and they give you a green card and a Social Security, and you're good to go. You are already legal.

That place, they also deal with a lot of drugs. There's a lot of drug dealers around selling drugs. My uncle hated to hear from me that I had gone there to walk around. It's like a big pond, like a small lake, a manmade lake, and there's a lot of Hispanic people around there. There's nothing but Hispanic people. I have some friends that happen to live a block from that park, but they would deal with drugs, and I didn't know. I knew they had money and they had nice cars. One of them had a Toyota Supra, brand new. The other one had a Chevrolet Caprice. The mom had a lot of jewelry. Their apartment, compared to the ones that I was living in with my uncle, it was well upgraded. My uncle was like, "Don't go there. Don't go visit them." They were my neighbors in El Salvador and they knew that I was here.

Every Sunday we used to go play soccer in San Fernando Valley in Canoga Park. We used to go play soccer over there. Everybody from the same town where I am from, they get together there, so you get to meet all the people that have left El Salvador years before you. You meet them there; you meet them again.

All the Salvadorans are drawn to each other.

Yes, and the people from the same town, from the same neighborhood. I had so many people from the same neighborhood that had left in the same time that my uncle left and people that knew my mom and my dad. They would be there.

I found out that these people—they would come there and they would invite me to the house since I wasn't working. They would come pick me up and take me to apartments and we would have some drinks and lunch and they would drive me back. My uncle hated that because he didn't get along with them because of that. He hated anything that had to do with the easy money that they were making because he was working hard and he didn't have anything. These people, when they go back over there, they go and show off. When people see you over there, they have the mentality too that once they leave El Salvador and come to the U.S., they're going to become the same people. They believe that you're going to find dollars on the ground, and it's not like that. It's hard.

Going back to the park, I went to this attorney's office and I told them that I had asylum. It was next to the office that I went to apply. It's just like this office fills out all the paperwork for you to send over to immigration.

A notary?

Like a notary. They just have all the forms. They help you fill it out.

They process the paperwork.

All the process; they send it over to immigration. This office was next to that office, and it says an attorney from El Salvador, a Salvadoran attorney. I'm like, okay. One day I went over and

asked him, “What could I do to go back to El Salvador for a visit?” He’s like, “I can prepare you a letter stating that somebody in your family is dying, and we can send it to immigration. Immigration will send you a grant for so many days.” I’m like, “Okay.” I gave him a hundred and fifty dollars. He wrote the letter. He put the seal on the letter like it was proof from El Salvador. He had everything there. He had a lot of people there lying for the same situation.

He sent it over to immigration, and immigration sent me a letter saying that I was allowed to go from the third of December, 1993, through the 23rd. They wouldn’t give you time to go spend Christmas and New Year’s over there. I would have to be back on the 23rd.

I went those days. It was sixteen days that I went over there. I found everything so much different. But it wasn’t as free as it was when I was there before; for everything that happened before I left, I wasn’t that free to go around and walk around because a lot of people knew what I did and they would probably snitch and I wasn’t safe. That first time I didn’t feel safe.

Is that when you rented the car and everything?

Yes, I rented a car. I didn’t feel safe going out for a walk, so I had to rent a car because we didn’t have a car over there. I had to rent a car in order to go places without them seeing me riding a bus or seeing me walking around, knowing that I was back after what I did because I was still considered a traitor. Even at the airport on the way back, they got my name and they started making phone calls. It was hard to leave El Salvador the very first time.

To get back out.

To get back out. It was hard because they said that they had a list of names of people that they still have in their system. Luckily that day the system wasn’t working properly. They said my

name was too common and they knew they had somebody with that name, so they had to verify and make sure that I wasn't one of the ones that they had on the list. But the system wasn't working, so they kept me there.

Were you nervous?

Yes.

Silly question, right?

Yes. I'm like, oh come on, I left the first time and now that I came just for fun, now they're going to come back at me and they're going to make me pay for what I did. I was still considered a traitor. They were going to put me in jail. All of that cleared up after 1995 when they signed a treaty. Everything was erased; there were no records of anybody. They erased everything, so I was free.

I'm going to suggest we could stop here. This is a fascinating story. Maybe do a second session?

Yes, because we haven't even gotten to Vegas.

No, we haven't gotten to Vegas. Your story, you hear that there are so many varieties of this story of coming to the United States under dire political situations. I'm going to stop the recording for today.

[End of session one]

SESSION 2

Today is August 29th, 2020. This is Barbara Tabach, and I am sitting with Leonardo for a second session.

We got you to L.A. from El Salvador and talked a little bit about your first job and becoming comfortable with living with your uncle for a while. I was curious about your uncle. What is his name?

Jose Francisco Martinez. We had an issue with that.

Oh really?

Yes, because my name is Jose, and you know the middle name, you hardly use it here, so he goes by Jose Martinez. When I started working and I started filling out forms and all kinds of applications after I got my first job, I went by Jose L. Martinez. A lot of times mail would come in as Jose Martinez, and one time I remember I opened an account with Sears. There was a charge. Well, I bought some stuff and my first bill came home, and it came as Jose Martinez, and his name was Jose Martinez. We had an argument there because I didn't have a Social Security and I opened it up with a Social that wasn't mine, but it worked, so they gave me credit at the store. My first bill came and he thought I was using his Social Security to open credit card accounts. We didn't get along. I don't know, for some reason he doesn't like my dad for what my dad did to my mom, leaving her with five kids besides me, and he just doesn't like him. He says that every time he sees me, he sees my dad. Whenever he was drinking and he got drunk, he would come up with crazy comments, saying that he didn't want me at home. A couple of months after I arrived to L.A.—I don't think him and his wife were comfortable with me there

because they had a very small apartment. It was like a studio, one of those that the bed folds down from the wall.

A Murphy bed, yes.

There was not enough room for the three of us plus the little daughter that they had, my cousin. She was five back in the day. It wasn't enough room. A couple of months after I came over from El Salvador to L.A., he asked me if I was feeling comfortable or if I wanted to leave. I didn't...even if I wasn't comfortable, there was no way I was going to tell him that I wasn't. I didn't have a job. I was only going to school. It took me about a year to get my first job. All the time that he would come home, I was watching TV after going to school. By the time he would come home, I was already home, too, from school. If I was watching TV, he would come in and turn off the TV and turn on the radio. I was like, okay, he doesn't like to watch TV when he comes home from work, so I'm going to start listening to music by the time he gets here. I had the radio on, so he would turn off the radio and turn on the TV. Nothing I did...it was always to please him.

On Saturdays I remember I used to get up early. They had a big parking lot at the apartment building where we lived. I used to go out and wash his car so he would have it clean for the weekend. He didn't like it. Nothing I did was ever comfortable, nor was I able to please him.

Was he documented himself?

Yes, he was. He came here in the early '80s, so he was able to work his immigration paperwork through the amnesty that they had back in the '80s from the—was it from the labor people working in the fields? Like, picking up groceries and vegetables. He was able to work it out. He

didn't work there, but I guess...if you paid an attorney some sort of money, they will get you a letter stating that you have work during the time that they're requiring. They would give you a letter and that letter would go to immigration. That's how he was able to become a citizen.

Maybe was he a little nervous having you because you were undocumented at that time?

Maybe. He never said anything. I never asked him.

But he let you stay there.

He did. He is the one that borrowed the money, or he had the money to give it to me and my mom so I could pay for my trip to L.A. I don't understand why he helped me, and when I got here...I think it was something to do with his wife; that his wife wasn't comfortable. It wasn't with him, but his wife. She is kind of weird sometimes.

Families.

Yes. After three days, they're people and visitors.

Yes. Especially in cramped quarters, I'm sure. During that period of time, how did you start adjusting? You talked about that first little job you had.

With that lady in Beverly Hills. My uncle's wife, she was working with this lady. She was cleaning her house. I probably came up in a conversation that she had that I didn't have a job; I was only going to school. She said that she had a little project, just cleaning the fence. She had some of those plants that grow up on the wall. She just needed to trim those plants. She asked my uncle's wife if I was able to do it. She took me. I didn't speak much English, and she spoke very little Spanish. We were struggling, but we were able to communicate. She would ask me if I was hungry or what I needed. We would go to Home Depot and try to buy stuff, but I didn't know

what to buy. I didn't know what tools because I had never worked in that field doing gardening or anything like that. All I knew was to get a big knife or some clippers, so that's what we ended up getting.

It took me forever; it took me over a week to trim the wall that she needed to get fixed. She could have paid a gardener and they could have done it probably in a couple of hours, but it took me a week. I remember she asked me how much I wanted to make, how much I wanted to get paid for the day that I worked there when basically I didn't even work the day because we went to Home Depot and then she took me to lunch. I probably worked a couple of hours, and then she's like, "Oh, it's time for you to go home." She would send me home. The next day she would want me back at eight o'clock. I was there and I would work three hours. First, we would go to breakfast. Even though I wasn't hungry, she would take me to breakfast, to Beverly Hills because that's where the house was. We used to go to Rodeo Drive, one of those restaurants there. I felt uncomfortable. First, I didn't speak English. Second, it was...I felt like I didn't fit in there, but it was her. She would take me to breakfast, then come back to the house and work for a couple of hours, and then go to lunch, and have two more hours, and she would be like, "Oh, you need to go home." That's how she kept me there.

She gave me over a hundred dollars. But the last day she gave me two hundred dollars, the Friday. In that way I got eight hundred dollars. I'm like if I can make this...That was back in '91. In fact, I started making numbers. If I can make this in a week, in six months, I can make enough to buy a big-rig truck, ship it to El Salvador or drive it to El Salvador, make my living over there, because I was doing that; I was driving big trucks over there before I left, before I went into the army.

That was in your mind when you came here—

Like I could have, yes.

You were escaping, but now you could get ahead financially, and you still wanted to go back to El Salvador to live?

I did. I didn't think I was going to last here. I didn't think I was going to stay here for thirty years. I only thought I was going to make it maybe a couple of years and then go back and just start working over there, what I knew, and maybe with a better financial situation because of the money I probably could save from working here and going over there. It was going to be a lot of money because the money back then, we had our own money, a *colón*, *colones*. Now it's a dollar. For every dollar, they would give us five *colones*. You would see the money over there; the dollar money, you would see it over there. Nowadays everything is more expensive over there than here, and we have dollar.

Did you keep all the money in a bank? Did you open an account? Did you send money back to your mother? How did you take care of your finances?

I wasn't able to open an account. I had maybe six hundred dollars left because the first day I remember I went to the swap meet and bought me a pair of shoes, I bought me some jeans and shirts, and I spent like two hundred dollars. I gave my uncle two hundred dollars for the food that I was eating at the apartment. I remember my uncle saying, "Don't give me that, give it to my wife. She is the one in charge of the bills, the groceries and all the food that we eat, and I'm in charge of paying the rent. But besides that you have to start saving for the five thousand dollars" that he paid for me to come here. I had to start saving the money to pay back to him. I'm like, "Okay."

I gave everything away and I ended up with nothing, though I needed to send money to El Salvador because my mom didn't have my dad's support. I left in March 1990. A few months after I left, he [my dad] left home, too. He just filed for divorce and that was it. He divorced my mom. She had five kids. My younger sister, she was three years old, and that's how I remember them. My sister, the youngest one, three, and my other brother, five. That's the picture that I have of my little brother, though my brother is over thirty years old right now. I still see him as the little kid that I left when I left El Salvador.

My uncle's wife has a brother that was a supervisor in a parking company. I always asked him if he could help me get into the company to start working there.

This is in L.A.?

This is in L.A. Every time I ask him, he would say, "Yes, I'll let you know when something comes up. I'll let you know." Irma, my uncle's wife, one day she came up and she starts asking me what was I going to do to get money to pay for the food and to pay for the rent because nothing was free here. She even advised me to go pick up cans, plastics and aluminum cans, so I could collect some money. I felt bad.

Because you could turn that into cash back then, at least in California.

Yes. I'm like, "I didn't come all the way here just to pick up cans, to go collect cans. No, I'm not going to do it." She is like, "Okay, if you don't want to do that, you can go to the corner of Office Depot." There was a nursery store, I remember, on Olympic and Normandy; there was a nursery place where all these people come over and they just stay there, and people that need something to get done at their houses, they would pick them up.

Day labor.

Yes. I told her that I couldn't go because I was going to school. My uncle kind of enforced it; that I would go to school in the morning and in the afternoon. I was like, "Why am I going to go twice if I can try to find a job during the day and I can go in the evening to school?" He was like, "Well, you're not working, so you better go to school twice a day." I was going to school twice a day. I told her, "I can't go because I have to go to school." She is like, "Okay, you do whatever you want, do whatever it takes, but you have to come up with some money because the food is not free and the rent is not free, and, besides that, you have to pay your uncle the money that he spent to bring you here." She was always making those kind of comments.

Her brother, he was one day able to get me an interview. The human resources person, the girl that was doing the interviews, was his friend. She was like, "I don't know. You don't speak much English. But we're just going to do an interview here. Tell me what you understand and what you don't understand. I have to do it in English because there's no way I'm going to do it in Spanish." Though she spoke Spanish. But she said, "Because I have to have it in English. I'm going to write the questions and write whatever answer you give me. Don't worry about it. You already got the job. You just have to say here." I was able that day...

I remember my uncle's wife, Irma, she got pregnant. She was about to have a baby at the same time I was getting the job. She had said that if I didn't have a job by the time she got the baby, I was going to become the babysitter. I'm like, really? You're going to pay me for this if I'm going to be taking care of a newborn baby. I was trying to see what I could do. I went to carwashes, and I didn't get a job. I even went to a McDonald's on Crenshaw and Martin Luther King, and I didn't get a job. They asked me if I could sweep, if I could use a broom. That's all I remember they asked me. I said, "Yes, I don't have a problem with that." They're like, "Okay, yes, we'll give you a call." They never called me. I was trying to find a job because by then a

year had gone by, so I was moving around by myself. Since I was going to school, I knew some English, so I was able to go places and ask for a job, but I never got a job by going by myself. I guess if you don't know anybody, it's hard to get into a company, get into a place and get a job.

Irma's brother, he got me an interview. I went there. That was on a Wednesday. It was two days before my little cousin was born. He got me a job and it was in Beverly Hills. On Rodeo Drive, there used to be a parking lot, the city parking lots, and they managed those parking lots. The parking was free, and it was validated parking for everybody where they would have two hours free for people to go to the stores. It was free parking for everybody, so we just get the cars, take them and park, and then bring them back. It was only five dollars an hour job, but it was better than staying home and not doing anything. I remember my first check, I got home and I told my uncle, "Hey, I got the first check. Can you take me to the bank or a place where I can cash it because I need to send money to El Salvador?" He's like, "Oh, just endorse the check." I endorsed it and gave it to them. He's like, "This is the first payment for the five thousand dollars that you owe me."

He took the whole amount.

Yes. I asked him, "Hey, what about the bus fare because I need to get back to work?" He's like, "I'll give you thirty dollars. I'll get you a monthly bus pass so you can use it." That's the only thing he would give me.

But I forgot, before I got to that job, the same guy, Irma's brother, his boss, the guy who owns the parking company, had another company, like a lumber company, and he had trailers and different vehicles that would go out and do deliveries. We would come in on Saturdays to wash those cars, wash his car, his personal car, and there were five trailers that they had for

deliveries and we washed them on Saturdays. There were five of us. They were some other friends that were in the same situation I was, no job, and that was the only job we had; that one day a week. But they would give us a hundred and seventy each. He would pay him like one thousand dollars on Saturdays to do the whole job, so they would give us a hundred and seventy to two hundred dollars each; they would split it among all the guys working there. Sometimes we had to go to his house in Calabasas and wash his mobile home, RVs; he had all kinds of toys that we would go there and wash them, wax them, and that was on Saturdays. That money, I was able to save it and send it over to my mom. I was helping with the money, two hundred dollars, a hundred and fifty, a hundred and seventy that we'd get on Saturday, and that was enough because that four times, it was like three hundred, four hundred dollars. I would send her a hundred and fifty dollars a month, and I would help her like that.

Some Saturdays...He had to give me a ride to the place. I mean, I was living with them. He had to drive me over there. I still don't understand why some Saturdays I would wake up as soon as I hear that he was up. He would go to the bathroom and brush his teeth, take a shower. I would go after him. I would ask him to give me five minutes. Sometimes I didn't even take a shower because I was afraid that he would leave. He got so tired of giving me a ride, he said, that sometimes he would tell me, "I'll be in the car. I'll give you five minutes." I would go brush my teeth, wash my face, and by the time I step out of the door, he was gone.

It sounds like he wanted to be nice to you, but, yet, it sounds like it was a little rough for everybody.

Yes.

But you had no alternatives at that point.

No. And I didn't have transportation.

There was my friend, this other guy that came six months before I came to L.A. He was ahead of me six months. He worked at the same company or his—it's the whole family, really, the whole family there. This guy, my friend—

Were most of the people from El Salvador that he hired?

The people I knew, it was all his relatives.

That makes sense, okay.

There were some friends, very close friends and some other guys that were relatives. This guy, we went to school together in El Salvador. He came to L.A. six months before me, so he already had a job because he went straight to the company, though he didn't speak any English. He said he didn't need it. He didn't need it. He didn't care. He still, as of today, he doesn't go to school; he doesn't speak English. He doesn't care.

I remember one time he told me that there was a friend of his selling him a car for four hundred dollars. It was a Nissan 210, Nissan, Datsun. He was giving it to him for four hundred dollars. He told me, "Hey, give me two hundred. I'll pay two hundred because I have two hundred. We put together four hundred dollars, and whenever you need a ride or whenever you need to use it during the week or when I'm working, you can use it." I'm like, "Yes," whatever. I give him the two hundred dollars. He was my savior because when my uncle didn't take me to work, I would call him, praying that he was still home, because he lives in Montebello and we live in L.A., so I was just praying that he was still home by the time I called him. There were no cell phones back then. When I called him, I'd say, "Hey, my uncle just left and you need to take me." "Don't worry about it. I'll stop by. I'll stop by, pick you up, and we can go to work."

He was all surprised when I got there with my friend. He was like, “What are you doing here? Didn’t I leave you at home?” Things like that...I don’t know. We were relatives, but that’s why we don’t have any communication.

That’s too bad after all that.

Yes. I don’t even have his phone number. I have his wife’s phone number because of Rocio, my wife. They used to talk. But that’s how I have her number, but I don’t have my uncle’s phone number. When I talk to my mom, she’s like, “Have you talked to your uncle?” I say, “No, because I don’t have his number.” I know he does have mine, but even when I call him—sometimes I call him and try to talk to him. I have nothing against him. He helped me come here, so why would I have any regrets? I don’t have anything. I’m clean. He’s family. Sometimes I try to call him. I used to have his home phone number, but since we don’t use it anymore...I have a landline, but it’s just for faxes or something that we need. We don’t need that number anymore. I used to call him at home, and if his wife would pick up the phone, I would ask for him, and she would be like, “Yes, he’s fine. He’s doing fine. Yes, I’ll tell him you called.” That was it and he was there.

What was your job at the parking?

I did valet parking.

How long did you do that?

I stayed in that company—’91 to ’99—eight years. I did it for eight years and I used to work seven days a week and I used to work a lot of hours.

What was your typical day like, then, for those eight years?

I didn't have a day off. Monday through Friday, I was working in Beverly Hills, when I was there because after that they assigned me a location. It was a business, office building, and I would go to that location and stay there Monday through Friday from eight a.m. to six p.m., twelve hours a day Monday through Friday. Saturdays and Sundays, they would give me overtime at the beach, at the parking lots on the beach, and I would work there. I was working seven days a week straight. It wasn't required for us to take vacations, so we could sell them and they would pay my vacations, and I would just work seven days a week for the longest time. For the longest I can remember it was seven days a week.

You were a good employee, to have somebody reliable for that amount of time; that's good.
You're a good employee.

I was very responsible. Whenever they called me, because I wasn't assigned to work on a Saturday, but they would call me and ask me if I was able to work, I would be there even though I was taking the bus.

I remember the first time I bought my first car. When I bought the first car, I took it home and I wanted to show it to my uncle. I remember he was eating. He was eating lunch and I came home all happy and excited that I had my first car. It was a Nissan 280. I went in and told him, "Hey, I just bought a car." He asked me why I bought a car; what was the reason I bought a car? I said, "Because I need my own transportation. I want to be able to commute and go to work. I'm tired of taking the bus." He's like, "All you bought is problems because that car is going to be a problem." I said, "Why would it be a problem? I don't see anything wrong with it." He didn't like it. I thought he was going to go and ask me to take it out for a ride, but, no, he just walked by and he went to his car and he left.

Well, my friend, this other guy that I went to school with who used to give me a ride to this other job that we had on Saturday, he was there and he's like, "Let me have the keys. Let me take it out for a ride." He would take it. He came back half an hour later, and he's like, "Here, I'll leave you my car and I'll take this one." We would do trades like that.

He never liked the idea of me buying a car. But I had to have a car because sometimes I have to work at nighttime, during the day, so I had different schedule. If I was working during the day and they needed me at night, I would go to anyplace. I wouldn't hesitate to say yes. I just liked to work. That's something I liked and my dad taught me that; he taught me to work hard even though I was at an early age and I never liked it.

What did you do for fun? If you were working all the time, how did you have time to even meet Rocio?

That was at school. From Monday through Friday, we would go to school at nighttime, from six o'clock to nine p.m. I was working Monday through Friday to six p.m., so from there I would go to school. The school that I went to was in West L.A. It was five minutes away from where I was working, so I was able to make it on time, and that's how I met Rocio, because she was taking the same classes. That was a long time ago.

All this time, did you get documentation at any juncture, any time while you're living in L.A.?

I did. When I first got the job, I didn't have the legal documents. But there is this place that you go in L.A.; it's called MacArthur Park that you can find anything. You can become legal—

I think you talked about this the other day, yes.

In a matter of minutes, you just take a picture and you write on the back of the picture your name, date and birthdate, and they give you a green card and Social Security. That's how I opened credit card accounts. But about six months after I started working, I was able to apply for asylum because of the situation that we had in El Salvador and the reason why I left. Everything fell into the same bucket, and I was able to gather everything I had and why had to leave, everything I experienced and went through in El Salvador. I was able to apply for asylum, so they gave me a good Social Security and a work permit. We would renew the work permit every year. After a couple of years, in '93, that's the first time I went back to El Salvador after I left. I was using the work permit, but they would allow you to go back to your country and be able to come back to the U.S. for a certain amount of days, so I did apply for that. That's how they didn't take my entry to the U.S. They didn't take it from 1990 the day I arrived and crossed the border; they didn't take that. When I applied for my residency card, they took the day that I flew into the U.S. legally with a work permit. I didn't have to go back to El Salvador and spend ten years over there as a penalty for coming to the U.S. illegally.

That was lucky for you, right?

It was. It worked in my favor. I didn't even know that that was going to work out. I didn't do it for that, but it worked out, and that's how I was able to...

Did you use an attorney during that process to help you with those documents? Did they help?

Yes. For the work permit, for the asylum, it was this office; they only had notaries. There was somebody there with a license, but all the employees...I never met an attorney there. But they had to have somebody who knew the laws, and they were just there just to fill out the paperwork,

paperwork that anybody could fill out, but you feel more comfortable having somebody putting a seal on it and sending it over to immigration.

You already have a debt to your uncle, and I'm assuming all this other paperwork is not without—you have to pay for that, too, right?

Yes.

I kind of know—a different era, but my son-in-law, the bills pile up.

They do.

They're daunting.

Yes. But when I first started working in the parking company, every check I was getting, I was endorsing the checks and giving them to my uncle, and I would just save some money because we used to get tips. When I was doing the valet parking, we used to get tips, and that would help me. I would give him the check, six hundred dollars, seven hundred dollars every two weeks. I would endorse the check, keep the tips, and that would help with lunch money, and with that I would give him a hundred and fifty a week for me to stay there. It was a hundred and fifty or a hundred and seventy. I think I started with a hundred and fifty, and then they asked me for a hundred and seventy that would cover the food, but that was a week, the food and my staying there.

Your room and board, yes.

Yes. But I wouldn't even eat there because I was not at home, so I wouldn't eat. I would just give them the money, but I would eat outside breakfast, lunch and dinner. That's how it went.

After I finished paying him the five thousand dollars, I was clear and I started saving more money.

For the asylum, it was just once a year that I would go to the same office because they had all my records, and they would fill out the paperwork, and I would give them five hundred dollars, and they would send a check to immigration, a money order. That's how much they charge every year just to renew it. It was just a renewal process. There was no amount to pay to work. It was just a renewal application every year.

Even when I married Rocio, because she had her green card, she had papers when I met her. But people say that—and I used to joke around—that one time I saw her at school, and I saw when she was about to pay for a coffee that she was buying. When she opened her purse, I saw a green card in it, so I was like, oh, I have to stay here; that's my green card; that's my free pass right there. I even tell Nathalie that. She's like, "No, you didn't do it for that." I'm like, "No, no, when I saw her paying for the coffee, she opened her purse and I saw in her wallet that she had a green card, so I was like, okay, I'm not moving from here; I'm staying here. That's how I got it."

We moved in together. Since I was having issues with my uncle, I just wanted to move out. We got to a point with him that he changed the locks of the door. When I was coming in from work that day, I found out that my key didn't work. I didn't even want to knock on the door. It was around ten p.m. That was after class. When I had a serious job, the job in the parking, I would work all day and go to school from six to nine and then be back around ten because we lived in L.A. It would take me about half an hour to get there with no traffic. That day my key didn't work. I didn't want to knock on the door because I knew there was a reason why my key didn't work. I went to the car. I slept in the car. I remember there was a lot of gang

members walking around because that was their neighborhood. They would walk around, tap on the window, and ask me—

Were you scared?

I knew them. I knew them because when I was taking the bus coming back from work, they wouldn't do anything to me. Everybody was so scared that they didn't want to walk around that area because it was dangerous because there were drugs and gang members.

What was that neighborhood called? Did it have a name?

Yes, it did have a name. It was like the MS.

Oh really? This is hard-core gang.

Yes, it is. It's right there on Westmoreland and Ninth Street. There was a 7-Eleven there. There were twenty of those guys all the time. When I didn't have a car, I would walk by that place around eleven because it would take me longer in the bus. I would walk by there, and they would come up to me and ask me for money. Because I was wearing a uniform, I'm like, "I'm coming from work. What do you think?" They were like, "Okay." On Fridays they would stop me again. They would come up and they were like, "Hey, man, can you get us some beers?" I remember they only drank Mickey's, a small green bottle and it had a sticker, the brand name; it's a B. It's called Mickey. They're very strong. They're like a Gerber bottle, but they're very strong. They would be like, "Hey, we need some beers. Can you go get them because we can't? Now, we have money." Sometimes they would even tell me that they have money, but they couldn't go because they were not legal age to buy beers.

They were teenagers.

Yes. They would be like, “Can you go get some beers for us?” I’m like, “Yes.” I would grab the twenty-dollar bill, go inside and buy them four cases. They’re like, “But this is more than we asked you for.” I said, “I put the other ten dollars. Just keep them.” That’s how I start becoming friends with them. Every time I went by, “Hey, you got five dollars?” I’m like, “Yes, I got some tips.” I would give them five dollars. They would be like, “Anything you need, if you ever run into trouble, if somebody gives you a hard time, just come to us and tell us.”

Did you ever have to call upon them for help?

I did. There was one time my car got stolen, and I went to them and said, “Hey, what do you know about who took my car?” They’re like, “We didn’t take it because we know it’s your car. We know your uncle’s car. But we didn’t take it. But don’t worry about it. We’ll find it.” About an hour later, there was a guy knocking on the door. My uncle was like, “Hey, those bald-headed guys are outside and they’re looking for you because I have nothing to do with them. Tell them to go away. I don’t want to see them here.”

I went outside and I asked them what was going on. He’s like, “We found your car. It has no rims. It has no seats. No stereo.” I’m like, “Where did you find it?” “It’s just the car, but it’s on blocks. But we know who took it, so we’ll get you the parts. Just go get the car. Take the tow truck and go get the car before the police find it.”

I went there. By the time I went to the car—I went to the place where they had left it parked. There was this guy in a pickup truck. He’s like, “Hey, I got your wheels and I got you one seat. But don’t worry about it. We’ll get you the rest.” I’m like, “Where did you get them?” “Don’t worry about it. Just put the rims and drive it.” I took the car with just one seat, just the driver’s seat. Then we come home and they’re like, “Hey, man, we need five hundred dollars and

we'll get you everything." I said, "Fine, but where are you going to get it from?" "Don't worry about it. One of the guys that took your car has a car that looks like yours and it has everything in there. That's probably why they took your car because they have everything there." I'm like, "Here's the five hundred dollars."

They got me the whole car and they brought me the car to the parking lot. Imagine what my uncle's reaction was.

I can imagine. Now you have two cars.

Yes. He's like, "There's a stolen car right there. Your car right there. Take those two cars out of the parking lot." He said that he even was going to call the police.

I told the guys, "Hey, take the car. I don't want it. I'll go to the junkyard and try to find the parts or go to the dealer and see if I can find them." They're like, "Give us an hour and we'll get you all the parts because you're cool with us, we're going to be cool to you. You help us, we help you, and that's how we survive here."

They took the car and they brought me the parts, so I was able to put my car back together again.

I'm sorry. That's so crazy it's comical. Through this whole scenario how long did it take, just hours?

Hours, yes. I don't know how, but...I remember one time I even went with them. They were like, "Hey, you want to come with us? We're going to drive around." I didn't have anything to do.

You went with them?

I went with them. I remember they had a pickup truck with speakers loud, so loud, and they had a camper. The pickup truck had a camper. They were listening to music. They were like, “Just be ready. If you hear some gunshots, just get down, lay low.” I’m like, “What do you mean? Where are you guys going to go?” “Oh, we’re just going to go drive around.” We went. When they stopped the car, they were like, “We’ll be right back.” They got out of the car. Three guys got out of the car. Five minutes later they come with rims, stereo, the whole system, putting it in the truck. I’m like, “What is that?” They’re like, “Oh, we just got it from a car.” Five minutes. They would take everything and leave the car on blocks. That’s how they used to do it. I’m like, this is crazy and I’m not going to be involved in these things, nah.

My uncle found out that I was going out with them. I said, “That’s the only friends I know. That’s the only people I know. They’re cool with me. They even asked me if I ever needed them to come over and beat you up, they will do it because I tell them what you do.” He just looked at me like you’re crazy.

Did your uncle continue to live in that neighborhood?

Yes, he did. He did up until a few years ago. Somebody bought the building. The whole family lived there, his wife’s family, her mom, aunts, uncles. There were eight units and all of them were occupied by the whole family. This is just a few years ago the building was sold out, and they were given thirty thousand dollars to vacate the property and go find another place. Up until a few years ago, they were paying five hundred dollars for a one-bedroom apartment. They were so lucky because a one-bedroom apartment right now is fifteen hundred dollars. They were only paying five hundred dollars, but now they’re living in a different building not far from there, paying a normal fee.

Did you ever have any encounters with police yourself with this gang or by yourself; anything like that?

No, when I went out with them, no. There were just those crazy things that they used to do. "If you see a car that you like, just let us know and we'll pick it up and we'll take the parts." Stuff like that. They would come up and, "Hey, you want to buy a stereo?" I'm like, "I already have a stereo." They're like, "This is upgrade. This is a better stereo than the one you have. You can steal this one and sell the other one." They would be like, "Give me fifty dollars; twenty dollars," just for beers. They weren't even selling the stuff at the valued price.

I remember one day after that incident that my car was stolen, they broke the ignition. Whoever took it, they broke the ignition and they started it up with a screwdriver. That's the only thing I didn't have. That was in April '92. That was during the Rodney King riots.

Oh, you were there then.

Yes. During that week I got the car, but I didn't have the ignition. With that I had to go to the dealer or I have to go to the junkyard and try to get the ignition and have a locksmith make a key for the ignition. But since I could start it with a screwdriver, I didn't care. But I had to park it always in a safe place because anybody could take it. The door lock was messed up, so they opened it up with a screwdriver, and the ignition key.

That night that the riots were going on, I was in class. I didn't want to take the freeway because they said that the freeway was where all the traffic was jammed because all the exits, like Crenshaw and all that area over there, were closed. I avoided the freeway and I took Wilshire from Santa Monica to Los Angeles. I was passing the National Historic Museum right there on Fairfax and Wilshire. I was driving by and I saw a police car. It was facing me. I was

coming to L.A., and they were going the opposite way, but I was the only car there. They turned around and came right behind me. They stayed on my right side and put the lights. They lighted my car and they saw the screwdriver in the ignition key. It only took seconds and they pulled me over. They started asking questions and asking who the car belonged to. I'm like, "It belongs to me." I couldn't even find the registration. The first thing that came up to me was, those rims, I just got them; the stereo I have, I just bought it from these people; everything I had. They wanted to see receipts of everything I had. I'm not going to be driving and carrying receipts. They're asking me where I was coming from. I said, "I'm coming from school." They're like, "What are you doing in this area?" I said, "I'm going to L.A. and this is my way home. I just didn't want to take the freeway."

They got me out of the car. They put the handcuffs on me, put me on the ground facedown. I remember one of the officers put his foot on my back, and he told me not to move. I'm like, "How am I going to move? Look where I am. Look at my position. How am I going to move?" He was like, "Just shut up." They just kept telling me to shut up. I'm like, "I'm not even saying anything. Why are you telling me to shut up? I'm not doing anything. I'm not saying anything. I'm quiet."

They opened my car and they removed the door panels because they said that I was carrying drugs or weapons behind the door panels. They removed the door panels of the two doors. The speakers, I remember I had a big box with some twelve-inch speakers in the back. They broke the speakers. With the screwdriver I had as the key, they broke the speakers. They were trying to find weapons. I'm like, "I don't have any weapons. I'm coming from school." I still had the uniform. I also had an extra shirt in my backpack, but that day I was like, I'm just

going to put on my uniform shirt, so I look more like I'm coming from work instead of just having a regular shirt.

Because the riots are going on. Sort of a protective...

Yes, I kind of have an idea that I might have gotten pulled over, and I did get pulled over. They destroyed my speakers, the door panels, and they kept me there for about an hour. Then they sat me there on the sidewalk, and they were just trying to find something. I even told them, "Hey, get my wallet, check my driver's license, check the registration." And they were like, "We don't need that. We just need to find the weapons that you're carrying." I said, "I'm not carrying any weapons." They kept me there and then they received a call. They're like, "Oh, you're lucky, we have to go." They let me go. I just kept driving with no music and door panels flopping.

That poor car.

Yes. I took it home.

I mean, poor you, too, but this car is bad luck.

I was so scared. I sold the car. I sold it for five hundred dollars after that because even these guys, they were like, "Hey, you know what? Get rid of the car. Get something different, something that doesn't get much attention from anybody."

It was a little too flashy?

Yes, it was a sports car. It was like the same version of the Nissan 300, but that was the old version back then. They were like, "Get rid of the car. Get something else. Just get something that doesn't get anybody's attention."

What did you get?

I ended up getting another Nissan. I got a Nissan Sentra instead of a sports car. I was getting pulled over all the time, for any reason. I wasn't even driving fast, but I would get pulled over just because of the fact that it was a sports car.

You were accustomed to being pulled over already, okay.

I was. That's whenever I was driving, I never had a beer. I'm like, if I get pulled over, they're going to take me right into...Because there was no reason, but they were always pulling me over, and the area where I lived, too.

After that I started dating Rocio. She was also having issues with her sister, too, so we decided to look for an apartment and we moved in together. That was in '94.

Did you find a different neighborhood to live in?

Yes. She lived in Pacific Palisades, right by Malibu; that's where the sister had a house. Her sister didn't like me, either. Oh man, I have so much luck with that.

You're such a likeable guy.

Rocio's sister didn't like me at the beginning; I thought it was because of the situation of the area where they lived; she wanted to find somebody for Rocio, somebody with a degree, somebody who is somebody. She has that mentality. She is single and she hasn't found anybody because she doesn't like anybody. She's like, no, I'm not going to be dating somebody who works for somebody. She wants somebody with a high degree. I started dating Rocio. She knew and I knew that her sister didn't like me, so we decided after that, since she was having issues with her, too, we found an apartment that we moved in together.

By the way, when I graduated from high school, we were living together. We didn't get married until '98, and I started dating her in '92. We didn't get married until April of '98, she was pregnant already. She was a few months' pregnant when we came to Vegas. When her parents came from Colombia. They were kind of surprised that we were living together because there they have that mentality that you have to get married before you move in together. I think they're right. I agree now that I have Nathalie.

[Laughing] I'm sorry. Yes, yes. Being the father of a daughter, you suddenly see things differently, yes.

Yes. Back then I didn't really care. I was like, what's the big deal? But I asked myself, what's the big deal of us living together without being married? But now that I have a daughter, I understand now.

They asked me if we had any date for the wedding. I said, "What wedding?" They're like, "Well, she's pregnant. Aren't you going to get married?" I'm like, "Yes, yes, we talked about it."

We didn't even make plans. She was working at the airport. She was working for Central American Airline Corporation. One day we just decide that we were going to come to Vegas to get married because we tried in L.A. We went to these wedding chapel places, but she wanted to have something big. I couldn't afford it. I was going to school. I was working. I wasn't making much money. Working in a parking company, I wasn't making much money. We went to this wedding chapel place right there on Wilshire and La Brea. We asked information. Then she came out crying because she is like, "I can't believe we're going to get married. It's just going to be the two of us and two witnesses and that's it." I didn't know what to say.

One day we decided we were going to Vegas. We drove up and we went to the Little White Chapel. We got married there. We didn't even have witnesses. A couple of guys working there, they came and signed, and that's how we got married.

Very Vegas. That's very Vegas.

We didn't spend much money.

Had you been to Vegas before that trip?

Yes. I used to come with my friends on weekends. We would leave after work, like around six p.m., we would leave Los Angeles and we would drive up here and be here by eleven p.m. Then by six a.m. driving back. We didn't even stay the weekend. It was just a one-day trip, just for a few hours and then go back. We used to come like that.

Where did you?

Here in Vegas? We used to go to the MGM. There was the MGM, Caesars Palace. There was only a few casinos back then. There were not many casinos. There was less people, less traffic. There was only a few casinos.

Did you ever imagine yourself living in Las Vegas?

No, I never did. I never thought about moving to Vegas. One thing I always have is if something caught my attention, like if a place caught my attention, I start looking into that place. This lady that gave me the first job in Beverly Hills, she used to pick me up, when she took me to her house, in Marina del Rey. She used to pick me up at Lincoln and Venice Boulevard. I always got to that corner, and for some reason that corner reminded me of something that I didn't know

what it was. The place really got my attention; that corner. I'm like, okay, something about this place. Years later I end up living right there in Mar Vista with Rocio.

There was another thing, oh, here in Las Vegas, yes. We drove by one day and we saw the houses right there by Boulder and Tropicana. Her sister that came from Colombia, she came, her sister and her daughter, Rocio's niece. They came from Colombia and they lived with us in Mar Vista. They moved here first.

They moved to Las Vegas before you did.

They moved to Las Vegas before we did, and we used to come and visit them. I always got that place and I'm like, yes, yes. I always look at that place, but I never thought I was going to end up in that area or moving here to Vegas.

Is that something that you liked? You liked the neighborhood?

Yes. Those houses right there—because the community, compared to California, the houses were way newer than in California. In California, you have houses from 1940, houses that when you buy you have to do a termite inspection and things don't come up right. Here, an old house is considered from 1980s. I'm like, it's only twenty years old and the house is already old. That really got my attention that the houses were newer. But I never thought I was going to move up here.

When Nathalie was born, I quit my job with in the parking company, and I started working with Staples. Staples opened up a distribution center for deliveries. They came up big because they opened a distribution center in Maywood and one in Glendale. They came up like crazy because of the distribution.

When I was working at that parking company, there was this guy that used to deliver Staples' supplies to that building that I was working at. One day I asked him how hard was it to apply for Staples. "Not hard, but they're about to open a new warehouse in Glendale." Because he used to go from Maywood to Santa Monica; that was a long distance for him. He said, "They're about to open a new distribution. Let me give your name to my supervisor. Maybe they'll call you." And they did about a month after I gave him my name. I remember one day he was like, "Hey, they're going to call you." They called me. They gave me an interview. They gave me the job.

They asked me if I could drive. That's what I used to do in El Salvador. I started about ten years old with a guy that my dad used to work with. He would take me with him. My dad would take me to work. He would be like, "Let me take him and he can help me with loading the truck," with construction sand, cement and all of the construction material. He would take me with him to help him. He wanted me to start driving the truck, for some reason, I don't know why. He wanted me to learn to drive. He started teaching me how to drive. When I was maybe twelve, thirteen, I started driving on my own without a license. He would only give me the equivalent to ten dollars. He is like, "This is just in case you get pulled over, you give it to the officer with the registration, and they will let you go." That's how you survive over there.

When I applied for Staples, they just gave me a test with those little trucks to see if I could drive them and park them. I did good.

You didn't need the commercial driver's license then?

No, for those you don't need a commercial driver's license. They gave me the job. I told the people at the parking company and the building, because I had a very good relationship with the

building owner. He's an attorney and he had his office in the building. We got into a very...They liked me and they would invite me in Palisades. I told them that Rocio lived there. They're like, "I know where she lives. We know the area." They would be like, "Hey, you want to come over for lunch? You want to come over on the weekend? We have a pool. We don't have anybody. It's just us." It was just a couple and they were both attorneys. I would go there and have lunch with them.

When I was about to leave, I told them that I just needed a leave of absence, so they gave me three months of leave of absence, and the same thing with the parking company. I never took vacations, so they were like, "Yes, just take it." Those three months, I was like, okay, those are the ninety days that I need to see if I can survive with Staples. I wouldn't quit the job that I was there for eight years and try something new that I didn't know if I was going to make it.

When we got to the distribution center they opened in Glendale, one of the routes that came up was the west side route; that was Beverly Hills, just The Hills, the residential, Palisades, Malibu and Santa Monica. I'm like, I know that area. They asked if there was somebody familiar with that area, and I'm like, "Yes, I know the area. I know how to get there. I work in Santa Monica." We used to have the *Thomas Guide*, the big book of maps. We were driving, and they were stick shift, and you were driving with the hand that you had your steering wheel holding it and the map right there, looking for these streets. There was no navigation system, nothing.

First they just give you a test of an address to see if you can find an address in the *Thomas Guide* book. I never read a book, but I saw Rocio, she was good at it. She was good and she always carried a *Thomas Guide* in her car.

You had to have it. You had to have it especially in California.

Yes, yes. I never did. Every time we went out, she'd be like, "Oh, just open up the book and see how to get there." I asked her one day how to read it, and she told me the coordinates, the numbers, what the numbers meant in each corner. There were sometimes that it was the next street, the next address, it wasn't on the page, but it was like two hundred pages ahead in the book. She taught me how to read that book.

I passed the test. They gave me a test. They're like, "Okay, you got the west side area." They gave me that route on my first day of work. The guy who got me the job, he was training me. I got that route and I ended up going to that building that I was working in the parking company. I'm like, "I can't go in there." The guy is like, "What do you mean you can't go?" I said, "I told them that I needed a leave of absence, and it's only been a month, and now I'm working here on my own trying to make this route, and I can't go deliver there." But I had five deliveries in the building. He's like, "If you invite me to lunch, I'll go. Just stay in the truck." We parked the truck even farther because the people working in the parking lot would see me and they would tell my supervisor, who happened to be my uncle's wife's brother. They would tell him because I never told him. When they found out...After two months, I gave them a two-week notice. I was going to give them two weeks' notice, but I told them I was using my vacation before those two weeks so it would give me another month. That's how I quit the job.

That's funny.

I would just take that guy out to lunch just to have him do those deliveries for me because I didn't want those people to see me. Then after that I told them, "Instead of the seven dollars an hour that I was making in the parking job that I had, I was going to make sixteen dollars driving for Staples." I told them, "That's a big difference. I don't think there is anything here that is going to make me come up to that amount of money that I can make per hour."

Did you get benefits with either position, either the parking or with Staples?

The parking, yes, I had full benefits, and with Staples, yes, we did have benefits, too, all the benefits. I worked there six years with Staples.

Then Rocio's sister moved to Vegas. She started doing mortgage loans. First, they had a company over in Downey, and she started over there. She moved here and they opened an office here in Las Vegas. She used to talk about all the money that she was making because it was good. If you start making loans, you make good money.

Now, this is in...

Two thousand five, 2004.

Oh yes, it was good then, yes.

She is like, "Why don't you guys move here? You start working here with me, and I'll teach you how to do loans, and you can get your license." I'm like, why not? Just give it a shot.

I moved here a year before Rocio and Nathalie moved here. I stayed living with them for a year. I got my license as a loan officer. I started doing loans and I was doing well. I found out that there were so many ways to qualify people for a house that they were not going to be able to pay for it. If people wanted to buy large houses and what they were making was not enough, they were like, "Oh, but my cousin; my sister is moving in with me." I would go these seminars that would teach you how to talk to people and what to expect and how to educate them, how they call it. You have to learn to educate your clients. I would tell them, "But what's going to happen when your sister moves out? Remember you're buying the house, using their income, using your cousin's income, okay, you can qualify. But if they decide they're going to move, they're going

to leave you alone, then you're going to have to start making payments on your own, and you don't make enough money to cover the mortgage payment. What's going to happen, in six months you're going to default and you're going to file for bankruptcy and you're going to go into repossession. They're going to repo your house." Some people would get bad. I'm like, there's got to be something else that I can...I don't want to deal with this stress. I had a client that even went to the broker and told him that I didn't want to help him. I told him the situation, and he's like, "Well, he's right. It doesn't seem like you guys are going to be able to come up with the mortgage payment after two months. After you spend the savings that you have in the account, you're not going to be able to make the payment." They're like, "Yes, but we have—" It was her sister or another family in the house. He's like, "I don't know if you guys want to do that. You can do it, but I can get you somebody else that can do the loan for you. But he's right. You guys are never going to be able..." Said and done, they lost the house because they got split; they didn't even move in together. They got into a situation that they didn't want to live together before they even finished the transaction.

After that I decided that I was going to get my Realtor license. I got my Realtor license and I started doing real estate, just be on the sales side instead of the mortgage. I started doing that. The broker and the lady who owns the company happened to be Rocio's cousin. It's always been related to family. Rocio's cousin, she owned the company in Downey, and when they moved here to Vegas, they opened up one branch here, and they merged with this guy who had the real estate side and they had the mortgage, so they combined the two companies. It was like a one-stop shop. They would give you the loan and they would find you the Realtors because they had the Realtors there.

I got the license and I stayed with them. I never like to find a job and then find a different company and move to a new company and be moving around, so I stayed with the company even though there were some other companies that supposedly gave you better seminars, better training. I stayed with them and I'm like, whatever I learn I'm going to learn here.

They got a contract with the big banks, with Fannie Mae, with Freddie Mac, Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Chase. They got this contract; that's when in 2006, '7 and '8, that's when all the repo houses; they were just taking houses away from people, and that's how everything exploded, all the boom just started there. I was there and they were like, "We have a job for you." I'm like, "What kind of job?" "We need somebody that's going to represent the banks. We represent the bank, but you're going to represent the bank and us by going to the houses, knock on the door, and place a thirty-day foreclosure notice on the door." I thought it was going to be a regular job. Yes, I started doing it. They were giving me a salary plus vehicle maintenance, gas. My job was to drive around. At the beginning I didn't have any idea how to approach the houses.

I remember one day I went here by Racetrack and somewhere in old Henderson, but they were new houses. I knock on the door and the guy came out. First I needed to hand them the notice. If they weren't there, I would put it on the door and take a picture. I remember I knocked on the door. I told him it was a thirty-day notice for him to...see what he's going to do because it was in foreclosure. He came out with a hammer and started swinging the hammer in front of my face, and he told me to step out of his property, which he was right. I was in his property. He started swinging the hammer. It was a big hammer. He started swinging it in front of my face and I started backing up. I'm like, this is crazy.

There were some other people in North Las Vegas that came out with guns. I'm like, "It's you guys; if you guys were paying your house, I wouldn't need to be here. If I'm here, it's

because you haven't paid the house in a year and you're living here for free, so the bank needs to take the property back."

I started gaining some experience in how to approach them. I started just driving around and if I see the light, I would come up and check the meter. If the meter was on, it means that people were in there. I would just tape that notice on the door. They would call. I started basically kicking people out of their houses.

What did that feel like?

It felt bad because after I did that they were giving what they called cash for keys. They would give you like five thousand dollars to move out and you would turn in your keys and leave the house clean, no debris, no personal property. People started falling into it and rolling with that program that the banks have. The people would call and say, "Hey, we just want to leave the property." They would give them a month to take all their belongings and move out. I would go there with a five-thousand-dollar check and make sure everything was good.

Make sure they didn't take the kitchen cabinets out.

Yes. That was the one thing: All the fixtures, they would have to stay in the house. I started doing that. But the problem was when the people didn't get in contact with the company and six months went by and I had to actually come up to the door and tell them, "You are in foreclosure and you need to leave." They wouldn't listen. Another month went by and there was a point that we had to call the constable officers. I would show up. The constable was there, always early in the morning around seven a.m. They would come up, knock on the door. If you were sleeping, if you were in the house, they would tell you to leave. Fifteen minutes to grab whatever was most important for you and leave the house. They were only given fifteen minutes. Sometimes I would

go these houses where they have kids, like in summertime. We would kick people out of their houses, with kids. Where were they going to go?

There was this family that we had to evict, and the kid, a five-year-old boy, he came up and he's like, "Hey, can I take my Game Boy?" I'm like, "Yes, grab whatever you can." I would just take pictures of the house and make an inventory of what they were leaving in the house. I would say the whole dining set is there and just take pictures of everything. They would have up to thirty days to be allowed one day to move out everything they had in the house. Whenever I ran into that situation that there were families—when there were no people in the house, but all the belongings were in the house, for some reason people would leave the house and leave everything behind. If that was the case, we just changed the locks, sealed the house, made sure everything was locked and just leave. Sometimes people wouldn't even show up for their belongings. But when I ran into a situation where there were families, it broke my heart. I would tell them, "Just leave. Walk outside. Let us do our thing. Come back in a half hour and I will give you the key." Because I would keep the key.

It was three people showing up. It was the constable, the locksmith and myself. The constable, just to take the people out. The locksmith to change the locks in all the house. Me, just to place the seal on the door and take pictures of everything inside the house and make sure they weren't coming back.

I would tell them, "Give me a half hour and come back in a half hour, and I will let you in. From this point on, the bank has taken possession of the house. You can't come in. If they find you here, even though it's your house, you're breaking into a private property now because you're being evicted."

They will go for a walk. When they see the constable leaving and the locksmith, they will come back and I will give them the key. I say, “You can’t break the seal, but you can come through the back door, come through the side. I’m going to break the lock. Even though I put it on, I have to break it. Come through the side, through the back door, and stay in the house. But now you have to figure it out, what you’re going to do now because you can’t stay here.”

From that point on, they’re not paying rent, they’re not paying utilities, they’re not paying anything because everything has transferred to the bank. One day the broker happened to drive by. She drove by the property and she saw lights in the house. She had the key. We all have a master key to open the house. She came into the house and the whole family was there. They didn’t care. That was three weeks after they had been evicted. They told her that I was charging them rent. Four families, it was like they had the same mentality. The people from the bank found out that they were still in the house, and they kept up saying that they were paying me rent. Sometimes they would say that they were paying rent to the broker’s name on the window because we have to place a notice inside the window for the contact information for the bank, and they would say that they were paying rent to a person’s name on the window.

They were like, “You can’t be doing that.” I said, “But I’m just trying to help them.” They’re like, “We know you are not charging rent. We know they’re not paying. But you can’t let them live in the house after they’ve been evicted.” I got into trouble for those situations.

Did you get fired?

No, I didn’t. I quit. I quit because the volume dropped. While we had so many houses, I didn’t even have enough hours in the day.

It was a terrible time in our history.

It was. I was driving two hundred miles a day because I would go up to Moapa, to Jean, all the northwest, to Boulder City, and sometimes I would be in Moapa at eight, and they'd be like, "We need you to go to Boulder City. I would drive from over there to Boulder City and then find out that I needed to go to the northwest for another house. I was going like that, and they hired four more people, and they just left me on the southeast, another southwest, northwest, and northeast. They split the whole Vegas area, the whole valley into four different people. But then the volume started dropping, and I just worked three days a week.

But while I was doing this, I was working for FedEx. I was working part-time at FedEx. I was working from one a.m.—they called it part-time, but they gave me a position where it was over eight hours, so I would work from one a.m. to eight or nine a.m., so it was full-time. From there, I would go drive and do that real estate. I was doing both jobs.

When all the repo houses dropped, there was not enough volume. I was only working three days. I got to the point that I only had two houses, and there was no reason for me to even go to the houses. If I went there yesterday, why I am going to go today? I even told them, "There's nothing to do. Can I just take a day off?" They were like, "Why don't you just work whenever you want and we'll just give you three days a week?" It was part-time; they would only pay twenty-four hours that I didn't even work. I was like, I went here yesterday, why I am going to go? There was only two houses that I had in the whole area. I quit. I told them, "There's nothing to do. I quit."

Since I only had a part-time with FedEx and I was working inside the airport, I went to work for RC Willey. I was working there and I did a year there during the year Nathalie was in France. She went to Pau to study French over there. We decided we were going to take a trip over there. It was our opportunity for the three of us to be over there, so we went over there. We

spent three weeks over there. After I came back, there was a position at FedEx driving the big trucks, the big rigs, but it required a commercial driver's license. I went through the training. I had to quit RC Willey.

I came back to FedEx as a full-time, at the beginning it was part-time driving. They gave me training. I went to DMV and got my commercial driver's license. I started driving the trailers. Six months later, a full-time position came up and I just happened to stay with FedEx, quit RC Willey and I've been there ever since, just working there.

Are you delivering to people's homes?

No. My job is just to take all the freight that comes to the airport, from Memphis, from all over. Those containers that come off the plane, I'll take them to the stations where the drivers, the couriers take them and deliver, so I don't do much.

FedEx is a good company to work for.

Yes. I work eleven hours a day, but I only drive three times. In the morning I drive four, maybe an hour, an hour around two, and then at five o'clock just to go pick up everything they pick up, take it to the station, bring in the containers they're going to take in the plane. I don't have to touch packages.

That's good.

Yes. It's a super easy job. There's a lot of responsibility because of what you're driving, eighty-thousand-pound vehicle on the road, but it's fun. I like it. It's something I enjoy doing and they pay well.

You've had a variety of careers. To segue from there, you mentioned traveling to France when your daughter was there. Was that your first time to go to Europe?

It was the first time in Europe. We have traveled twice before that. First we went in 2016, the first time we went to El Salvador and visited my family.

We really should talk about that, yes.

That was the first time.

That was in 2016? That's the first time you'd been back. How many years had it been?

Since '93. It took me twenty-three years to go there the second time.

Wow.

I don't know why it took me so long. When I got there, most of the people that I knew when I was there, most of my friends, they were not there anymore. They were either dead somewhere around the world. All the kids that I left there, like the age of my brother, they were thirty years old. They would come up to me and ask me if I recognized them. I would say, "Nope, I don't recognize you." When I left, they were only five, seven years old. I went there twenty-three years after, so everything was different, the people, the neighbors. Some of the neighbors are still the same. But a lot of people, I didn't know. Nathalie, that was the first time that she was meeting my parents and all the cousins and uncles that she has over there. She was surprised that I had a big family over there. There were so many people over there that she didn't know; Rocio didn't know, either. That was the first time the three of us were there. We spent two weeks over there. We went different places. Nathalie enjoyed it. Rocio liked it, too.

What kind of expectation did you have going home after that...I'm trying to imagine what you might have felt like?

It was exciting. It was weird. You're expecting to see everything the way you left it. Some places, like I was mentioning before, there were these sugarcane fields that we used to have, and now I got there and there's nothing but factories, big factories there and everything is gone, everything is completely changed. People are different. The street that I grew up, the street that we lived on, it wasn't paved; it was just dirt, and there was not even power. I remember we didn't have enough lightbulbs to bring power to the neighbors, farther neighbors on the street. While I was here in L.A., there's a committee, an organization, and supposedly they were collecting money to improve the small towns over there, towns that didn't have powerlines, potable water.

In El Salvador?

In El Salvador. We were able with some friends, some of the neighbors that I knew that were here, we got together. I called them and we put some money together and we bought light poles, those cement light poles. They could extend the power down to the neighbors. We also started all the cabling for the telephone lines. I remember I had to buy four of those cement poles to have a phone at home. I had to buy four. But there were so many people who were going to benefit from those poles, but they didn't want to buy them because they were two hundred dollars a piece. They didn't want to spend that much money in order to get phone service in their houses. A lot of the neighbors that I had over there, they have somebody here. There's not a family in El Salvador who doesn't have a relative here in the U.S. There's more people outside of El Salvador than the people that there is in El Salvador, so every single family has to have somebody out of El Salvador that's in a different country.

And they depend upon the people who have exited the country to send some of that money back to improve those lives.

Yes, to improve their lives, because we don't live in the same situation that we used to live when I left. We have a better situation now. Not my brothers; they were working. We live better now.

The world thinks that things are still bad in El Salvador. You're saying it's not as bad as when you left.

It's not as bad. We don't have the political war that we had; we don't have that. What we have now is the gang members.

It changed that way.

It changed from one...I don't know if it is better or if it is worse.

It's a different problem.

It's a different problem. It seems like it's much easier to correct it than the way before, than the political war. This is just gang members, a group of these kids that don't want to find jobs; they just want to live an easy life. They do extortions. I haven't heard that they do kidnappings, but they do kill you if you don't...because I have a friend that had a few pickup trucks. With a pickup truck over there with an open bed, you can make your living with those type of vehicles, and they transport people from one small town to a different one. They have a function like a bus, but people are standing, they pay less and they are able to transport groceries, big containers with groceries. You can make a living out of those vehicles over there. This guy, a friend of mine, he has two and he was being charged thirty dollars a month. One day he didn't want to pay; he said that that was enough and he didn't pay them.

The gang was extorting him for thirty dollars?

Yes, a month. If you have some sort of business over there, they will come up to you and charge you what they call floor fee. If you're going to keep your business open, you've got to pay them. They offer you some type of protection from themselves.

What happened when he...?

He refused to pay and they came to his house and killed him, for thirty dollars. He got killed for thirty dollars.

Do the police come and arrest them, or what happens?

They don't do anything.

Because?

Because they're all involved. There is a lot of corruption over there. Police are...and some of the police, military members that are trying to be against that, they get in trouble. There was something in the news the other day. There was this police officer who arrested three gang members. He arrested them and he got into a fight and he was able to control them. I think he wounded one of the gang members. What do you call this organization with human rights? But they fight for the rights of every human being. He was in trouble because they said that he wasn't on duty when that happened, and they wanted to arrest him and put him in jail. This gang member, people in the group found out where he lived, and all his family got threatened, and they had to leave the house and everything.

Oh, Amnesty International.

Kind of, yes. They said you cannot actually try to do the right thing, be against them, because they are protected by the human rights. If you try to do something, they're going to come against you, and now they know who you are.

I see. The gang was being protected.

Yes.

Yes, Amnesty International wouldn't do that, no. That was a different organization.

Yes, it's like human rights.

In this country some people say that—what came first, MS-13?

MS-13.

That kind of gang, did it originate in the U.S., or did it originate in El Salvador? Where did it begin?

MS-13, here in L.A. That was like a Mafia here. It's a big organization and it originates in L.A., in the U.S. About ten years ago, Obama was deporting everybody, all the gang members. You hardly see gang members in L.A. now.

He cleaned it up.

He cleaned it up, but he sent them all to their country of origin.

And now they're terrorizing the people that live there.

Yes.

Your family that remains there, do they come in touch with that kind of activity at all?

No, they don't because it's mostly in the city and we don't live in the city. It's forty minutes outside the city. It used to be a rural area. Now, since it's populated and there are new factories and new houses, buildings there, it's like a city now. It's not like a rural place, but it's outside the city, so it's not that related. We have police patrolling the streets there. But even then, there are some areas that they control, but not in the area where we live. There are some areas that they even tell the families—this time when we went to El Salvador, they even tell you, “Don't go to this area.” They tell you the areas where they don't go that you can't go because they ask you and if you don't live there, you might get in trouble.

You weren't concerned when you decided to travel with Nathalie and Rocio there?

No, I wasn't. I just wanted her to—El Salvador, even though it's terrorized by all these people, there are so many places, like any other country, so many beautiful places that you can go and be away from those. They don't go there. They don't go to those places. Those places are protected where they live on tourism, and they're like beaches, those tourist places with swimming pools, like water parks. There are so many places that you go over there that you're out of that area and you can enjoy it, and Nathalie enjoyed all those places. I took her to different places. I took her to the beach, to those archaeological ruins and to those Indigenous places with little pyramids and all the stuff like that, and she was fascinated with that.

How have you stayed in touch with your mother and family that was in El Salvador? Until you actually traveled there, were you able to talk to your mom on the phone? Did you stay in touch with her? Was that easy?

The first few years it was just by letters. Even to send her money, I would have to buy a money order and put it in an envelope and send it over via U.S. mail. My godfather, he was somebody

that looked like he had money. His kids were in the university. He had kids in college. His wife was a teacher and he was a teacher himself. But it seemed like he had money. He was the only one with a landline telephone in that community. I would call him and he would send one of his employees to go call my mom, and then I would call half an hour later, and that's how I was able to talk to her the first few years. But then after we were able to buy those poles and be able to run the lines to the houses, we started getting a phone. Now we don't need to use a phone; everything is Facebook, Messenger, FaceTime. We don't even use that landline anymore. But I do have a magicJack.

Oh, I forgot about those. Yes.

I do have a MagicJack over there with a (702) area code. I call them, they call me with a local number.

How nice is that.

Neighbors that want to call somebody from over there to here, they just call from there. At one point my brother was charging like two dollars for every half an hour. I said, "Why are you charging people? Just give them the phone. Make sure it's charged. You don't have to pay anything." It's only thirty dollars a year and I don't have to pay anything else just to keep internet line over there. It works over the internet. I said, "Why are you charging people? Just let them make a phone call. Give them ten or fifteen minutes free. Let them make a phone call. Why are you charging people?" He's like, "They have to pay. Hey, they're using power. They're using the internet." I'm like, "Just let them make a phone call." Some of the neighbors just go to the house and make a phone call and not spend any money.

That must have been exciting to see everybody in person for the first time in over two decades.

It was. That was 2016. Last year, 2019, I went back. I went back because Nathalie went to Costa Rica, and after she finished Costa Rica she flew to El Salvador, and we met over there.

There was a surprise involved in that, wasn't there?

Yes.

Tell me about that.

I didn't plan it. I wasn't planning on going over there yet. They knew she was in Costa Rica. First I wanted to go to Costa Rica, but I couldn't go. The flight was too expensive to go to Costa Rica and then fly back to El Salvador, so I flew straight to El Salvador. I got there and there was no Nathalie because I got there first. My mom was like, "Where's Rocio and where's Nathalie?" I was like, "No, they're not coming."

Two days later I just grabbed the car and I told my brother, "Hey, can you come with me? I'm going to go to the airport." When I told him that I was going to go to the airport, I said, "We're going to go to the airport. I've got to pick up something that I left over there at the airport. They've been holding it and now it's clear to pick up." They thought I was picking up a box. He started drinking. He drinks a lot. He started drinking and by the time I was going to leave to the airport, he was drunk. I'm like, now who am I going to take? My niece was there and she was like, "I can guide you. I can go." She was like, "But what are you going to do over there?" I said, "I just have to pick up something they've been holding because it wasn't clear for pick-up when I arrived, so we need to go over there."

On the way there I told her because I didn't want to tell her that Nathalie was coming because that's her cousin. I didn't want to tell her that we were picking up Nathalie because she would go run and tell my mom, and my mom would get something ready because if somebody is coming she has to cook. I told her, "I'll be right back." She said, "Can I go with you?" I said, "Nope. Just let me go to the airport."

We pick up Nathalie and got home. My mom was cooking and Nathalie comes around to her back and gave her a hug. She was all surprised that Nathalie was there. They both started crying. Now it was the second time that she has met her. It was only phone conversations that we had before that time. Now it seems like they know they see each other all the time, and they have a very good relationship.

That's great.

Yes. And my mom...

Does your mom live in the same house that you grew up in?

Yes.

What did that seem like when a person goes back to the house of their childhood?

It has a lot of sentimental value. It's just all the feelings that you get there. You're in the same house where you grew up and you can't believe that the house still exists. She is on the same piece of land that she has, but the actual house where I grew up is right next to the house that she lives in now because we built the house and it's a newer house. The house that I grew up in, my youngest brother lives there with his wife. It still has the same room where I used to sleep and my older brother. I got there and he's like, "Does it bring you any memories?" I'm like, "Yes." I

sit there in the living room and I start looking around the walls, the ceiling. I'm like, "Yes, it does have a lot of memories, things that you never forget." It feels weird.

When you reflect on it, when did you—or maybe you don't; maybe I'm assuming this—but feel that America, the United States was home?

You don't realize and time goes by too quickly. I felt a lot of difference when I went there the first time in '93 that after living here for three years, the kind of life that you have here in the U.S. is way different than you have over there. Staying over there, it was going to be harder; it's more difficult. Looking at the situation that the whole country was going on, I was like, I don't have that over there. I started just working. After Nathalie was born, I didn't feel the need of going back over there. After I was married and Nathalie was born, I didn't feel the need that I used to have that I have to go back. It felt like, okay, I'm making my own life here, so I'm just staying here. The years have gone by and it's been over thirty years because I got here in April 1990. April 2020, it's thirty years. Yes, it's been thirty years plus. I don't see myself—maybe when I retire I might go over there. Rocio doesn't know; Nathalie either. But we opened a tortilla factory with my brother.

Oh, you did?

Yes. It's mine. He's over there, but I told him—I don't know how many years I'm going to stay alive, so I just wanted to leave something over there that they can make a living out of it. But in the meantime, it's mine, but they don't know. They don't want me to do anything over there because of the situation over there that if they find out that there is a business going on, somebody will come and try to collect some money out of it. But it's working fine right now.

Your brother runs that right now?

He runs it and we hire two people that do the tortillas. The tortillas over there, they're handmade and they're thicker than the regular tortillas that we have here. They just make them. My brother has somebody who does a route, and he takes them and sells them, delivers them.

So far nobody has tried to extort them?

Not yet. I hope not. We've been doing fine with that. Besides paying everything off, all the daily expenses and involved with the opening, there is some money after all. I told my brother, "Just keep it there and see what happens."

Would you move back to El Salvador?

Maybe I would, but Rocio won't.

Yes, you're married to a Colombian woman.

She seems like she doesn't have anybody in Colombia anymore to go for. I have all my family in El Salvador. I told her, "We move over there and we can live the same way we live here. We can have the same kind of life now over there. It's much easier." When I retire, I plan on going back. By the time I retire, Nathalie is going to have her own life.

But you may have grandchildren.

Yes.

That makes a big difference.

It makes a difference. I don't know. I might. I might retire over there. After you become a citizen here, you can actually be over there and be here, fly back and forth. If you only have the residency here, you can only be out of the U.S. for six months. After the six months you have to come back.

Do you hold citizenship, dual?

I have dual citizenship, yes. We're able to keep the Salvadoran citizenship. Time is going by and now Nathalie is so busy that she doesn't have time. I have to take her to the embassy to get her Salvadorian passport and all her...She doesn't have them. When you go over there and go on vacation, you don't want to deal with going to this place and spending the whole day in line trying to fill out all the paperwork, so I have to do that, but I haven't done it. I don't know if she can...No, she can't have the three citizenships. Since it's firstborn from Rocio, she can have the Colombian citizenship and the Salvadorian citizenship. She can go live anywhere she wants.

She is a citizen of the world.

Yes, she can have the three nationalities.

Talk a little bit about food. You're making these tortillas. If your mother would have known Nathalie was showing up, what kind of foods do Salvadorians like to eat?

They have chickens over there. They have them in the house. It's not like they go buy the chicken and it's a frozen chicken.

Live chickens in the backyard.

Yes, it's a live chicken right there. She is like, "Whichever you like. Tell me what you like." Even my neighbors. She would do what we call *pupusas*. She would do that or those little wrap things, like *pasteles*. They fill them with potato, meat, chicken, whatever they want to put in it. All those typical foods that she knows we don't eat here every day, she will try to cook it and get it, anything that is typical food that we have over there. There is also this place that makes *pupusas* and they sell them three for a dollar, and here each *pupusa* is two fifty.

Yes, we've gotten *pupusas*.

Two fifty. Over there Nathalie is like, "Three for a dollar?" She's like, "How many people do we have at the house?" I'm like, "Eleven." She's like, "Get *pupusas* for everybody." That lady asks my brother when are we coming back because she knows that Nathalie is like, "We're eating *pupusas* every day, every day." They order ten dollars of *pupusas*. There is a lot for ten dollars. Here you don't even have enough because three *pupusas* is already ten dollars.

Is that your favorite food?

Oh yes. Those things you can eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner. It's like pizza. You eat pizza all the time. You never get some other kind of food that you don't want to eat every day, but that, yes. She will also do chicken soup and beans. There is a season, like right now, they harvest a lot of fresh beans and it's way different than the regular beans. They make them with meat, chunk meats, and they cook everything together.

Do you cook?

I do. Whenever I want to cook something I don't know how, I just YouTube it. Rocio doesn't even do that. Lately she cooks, but she doesn't like cooking. She is more into cleaning. She is always cleaning the house. But she will not say—Colombians have a lot of typical food, and very seldom she is like, "Oh, I want to do something."

The blending of the two cultures, was that difficult or easy because of that?

It's different in ways that for example when I am sitting at the table, when I am eating I like to have a drink and tortillas if we're eating chicken, whatever we're eating, or bread. Their culture, they don't eat tortillas. They eat a lot of rice, potatoes. They replace the tortillas for those other

kind of carbs. But they eat and they don't put any drinks. They serve the drink after you eat, and I'm used to having it there while I'm eating. It's been thirty years and she doesn't—when she's cooking and she's putting the plate together, I have to get up and go get something to drink. She's like, "Really? It's not complete?" I would say, "I need something to drink." Nathalie is the same thing. She's like, "No, we drink it when..." She has adjusted to both cultures. If Rocio is serving the food, she won't bother that she doesn't have anything to drink. Nathalie doesn't eat tortillas much like I do. She eats them, but not as much as I enjoy them.

Do you guys eat American-style food, like roast and potatoes or hamburgers? You fix that kind of stuff?

In El Salvador?

No, here.

Here, yes, we do, yes. After I end up in the hospital, they told me that I have to change my diet, eating habits, yes, I eat hamburgers, but very occasional. I don't eat them like I used to because in 2016 everything—we had everything that year. Nathalie graduated from high school. I think Rocio's mom died, too. We went to El Salvador, the three of us all together. After I came back from El Salvador, I end up in the hospital. I was going blind. I couldn't hold everything I drank and I was so thirsty. I didn't know what was going on. According to the DMV, I have to wear glasses, which I never wear. The day that I went to DMV for my renewal driver's license, I had to work from one a.m. to eight a.m. and then I went and drove for the repo houses and I went to DMV at four o'clock. By the time I got to the DMV, they made me take the test and I couldn't read anything. They told me that I needed glasses. I went to the doctor and I went back to DMV the following week and I passed my test without glasses. I keep my glasses.

In 2016, I was already driving trucks. I was coming from Phoenix. It was on a Thanksgiving, on Black Friday, I was coming back from Phoenix. I remember not being able to see the dashboard and the computer that we have in the truck. I was like, that's weird I cannot see it. Everything was blurry. I got home and I told Nathalie, "Hey, there's something going on. I can't see. Can you take me to the eye doctor?"

I went to the eye doctor. The doctor was like, "Have you been to your regular doctor?" I'm like, "No." "I can give you glasses, but they're going to be thick." I'm like, "What do you mean?" "You need binoculars now. You don't need just glasses. You need binoculars. You're going blind." I'm like, "Blind? How is that possible?" She is like, "Have you checked your blood pressure? Your blood sugar?" I'm like, "No. I'll go to the doctor, but in the meantime can you give me glasses?" She's like, "Yes, I'll give you glasses, but I'm telling you, you better go to the doctor right away, from here."

Nathalie took me to the Urgent Care. They took me in and asked me what kind of symptoms I was going through. I told them, and the doctor was like, "You know what? You need to go to the hospital. We don't have the equipment here to treat you." I'm like, "Well, what do you mean? I'm walking. I'm fine." They're like, "No, you're dying. You're like a cube of sugar walking on the street." I'm like, "What do you mean?"

I went to the hospital. I used to make fun of the Henderson Hospital, I used to make fun every time we drove by with Nathalie. I used to tell her that they had a promotion that for every single patient that they have, they have a free funeral. She is like, "Yes, let's just hope you don't end up there because they're going to give you a free funeral."

That day they sent me straight from the Urgent Care right there on Marks by Walmart; they just told me to go to the hospital. I got to the hospital and got to the front counter. It was empty. I was patient number twenty-five. Everything was so quiet, nobody. They had given me a paper at the Urgent Care, so I gave them the paper. They're like, "Okay, hold on." They went and got a machine. They got a blood sample. They're like, "Oh gosh, we can't even read it." I'm like, "Well, what do you mean?" "It reads up to five hundred, but in five hundred you're supposed to be in coma and you're walking." I'm like, "What's going on?" They took me straight to the room.

The doctor came up. He came up with a blood sample, with the results. He's like, "The sugar level in your blood, it's eight hundred and forty. With five hundred we have people in ambulance that come over because they're already in coma. You have eight hundred and forty. There's no way you can be right now walking." He asked me what I was doing during the day. I said, "I drove to Phoenix and I came back." He's like, "What did you drive?" I said, "Trailer and tractors." He's like, "You better stop. Call your company and tell them you can't work." I said, "But I have to go back to work tomorrow." That was Black Friday. I had to go back to work on Saturday because I was getting overtime on Saturday. I only work Monday through Friday, but Saturdays, they just give me overtime. I said, "I have to go back to work." He said, "No. And if you have family, if you have anybody that you want to say goodbye to, you better start making phone calls because I don't think you're going to be able to come out of this one. You're too close. If we don't drop the sugar level of your blood within the next twenty-four hours, I don't think you're coming out alive." I couldn't even believe it. The doctors was like, "No, I'm serious. You're dying."

What did they do?

They just gave me ice, insulin, and they had me in constant check. They were coming every hour.

You were admitted into the hospital.

Yes. They kept me there two nights, three days.

Since then you've changed your diet?

Yes. They diagnosed me with diabetes type two. They gave me insulin. I've been so scared of needles. When I was in school in El Salvador, they used to come to give you a flu shot. Once in a while they would go to rural places and give the kids. They would come to my school twice a year, and I would run. I would disappear because I was so scared of needles. I've been always scared of needles.

I went to CVS. At the hospital they gave me a box with two hundred needles, and they gave me a little bottle of insulin. They were like, "You have to start taking it yourself." I said, "How?" "Just put it around your belly." I'm like, "Okay." I started doing it. I only used insulin for six days, and I went back to the doctor after six days. My sugar level was normal. My sight came back. I went and picked up the glasses that I was prescribed. They were thick. They were binoculars. Then I couldn't wear them, so I told them we need to change the prescription. The doctor was like, "What happened? You couldn't see last week, but now you're back and you can see." She gave me a different prescription. She is like, "I'm still going to give you glasses, though it seems like you don't need it because you can still wear the old ones that you have, but I'm going to give you new ones." I used insulin for six days and I haven't had any ever since.

Oh really?

No.

You control it through what you eat?

Yes. I used to drink—my route from FedEx used to be from here to St. George every day, and I would carry a cooler with maybe a twelve-pack of Coca-Cola, and I would drink them all. I would stop at any place and grab me a hamburger or whatever there was. I would eat breakfast, lunch and dinner outside. My eating habits were bad. I know they were bad. I would eat a lot of Cheetos, chips and a lot of junk. Ever since, I started eating salads. I never ate salad before. Having a salad, it was like a punishment. But then we go and just get salad. I would go to Farmer's Boys and instead of hamburger now, I get a salad. I started controlling with my eating habits. I don't drink sodas. I only drink water. The most I get to it is a sweet tea, but I mix it with water, and that's the most I get now. It's just water.

Good for you.

Eating habits...I eat pizza, but like the doctor said, "You can have a Coca-Cola now, you can have it, but don't exceed your..."

Right. Excess.

Yes. The other day I had a Fanta orange. I couldn't drink it. I had half of it and I went to the bathroom and threw it out. I couldn't hold it. My body can't hold the sugar anymore.

You've retrained your—yes.

I control it with natural juice that I found on the internet that's made out of grapefruit, celery, pineapple, flaxseed and what they call *nopal*, which is like a cactus, Mexican cactus. You blend it all and I drink that. They got me on metformin; it's a pill. It's supposed to be four pills a day,

and I go pick them up. I have boxes and boxes at the house. I got pick them up every month because they still give me the lancets, the strips and the metformin every month, and the insurance pays for it. But I go pick them up. Whenever it's getting close to go to the doctor, I start taking it once or twice a week, so it shows up in my blood, the result that I go take, and it's controlled. I haven't had any issues, but mostly it was my eating habits. I got scared.

It was a big scare. You're very lucky. Before we end our conversation, are there any topics or stories that you want to share with me that we didn't cover? I'm sure you have many stories, but is there something that we haven't talked about that we should?

I don't know if I mentioned that when I was in the army in El Salvador, all the things that we did and all the training courses that we took. There was a torture course, training that they gave you.

They trained you how to torture people?

Torture people. Supposedly you're supposed to put them in practice when you're in the military life. That was something I didn't agree on. I didn't do it. The day that I saw this guy doing it, I remember the guy that chopped half of this girl's breast and put it on the grill, saying that he was going to eat it; that was the most I've seen. Because even though you don't do it, they have you in a room where they used to remove the nails and remove the skin out of people. There are so many things that even after I came to the U.S., I would have nightmares. I would have nightmares all the time. I got to the point that it didn't bother me anymore. I've heard for some people that if they see—I was talking to a friend of mine who was also in the military life in El Salvador. We were talking about the 1917 movie, and he's like, "I can't see that because it reminds me of when we were over there." I got to a point it doesn't bother me anymore. I controlled that.

But other people that you've talked to that have that shared experience, it still bothers them.

It still bothers them. They don't even want to talk about it. I know this guy in L.A. that lost an eye in the war. Sometimes I make fun of him. I asked him if he remembers the kid that I took his eye, and I make fun of him.

I have a shot right here; it was like a scratch. That was in '89. We were patrolling. They took all the air force base; that was taken by the guerillas. It was November eleventh, yes, November 11th, 1989. It was taken a few days—I wasn't in that base. I was in a different base, but the air force base was taken. We had to go and patrol around that area. I remember that one day we were patrolling and walking around with some other guys. There was this little girl; she was like ten years old. She had a long dress. We actually called her and asked her to come over because it wasn't safe. When we told her that it wasn't safe, she pulled out an M-16, a short M-16, and she's like, "What do you mean this is not safe?" and started shooting at us. She got me right here, just a little scratch that I got.

Oh my god.

A ten-year-old girl was shooting at us. She started running. We were not going to chase her. But some of the guys, they were so pissed off and they wanted to go after her. We kind of stopped them and said, "She's just a kid. Let her go." We got into trouble for that because I had the scratch and when we got back to the base, I went to the nurse and I went back to...Remember I mentioned the little cage that they have that they put you in there? They put me back in there for three days because I wasn't following the rules, their whole protocol of what to do. But I never liked that life. I wasn't...that was all of the shooting, but I don't like confronting people, doing it

face to face. I don't think I ever...I never liked that and that was one of the reasons why I escaped from that life and got away from there.

Glad you did.

Me too. Me too. I don't know what would have happened had I stayed. It wasn't...Some people, they make a living out of that, but...

You found a good life here.

I did.

It's been a better life.

Though I was also questioned here, why didn't I join the army when I came here to the U.S.?

Who had questioned you on that?

Immigration. Because when I came here, I came here when I was eighteen years old. They asked me why I didn't enroll in the army. I didn't know the laws here. Since I'm not from here, I didn't speak the language, I don't see why I would have to go and enroll in any of the army branches that we have here. The attorney had to—during the green card, during the residency process, I wasn't questioned that. I was questioned that when I became a citizen, because they asked me if I had served the country, and I said, "No." And they asked me, "Why?" I said, "Because I didn't think I had to."

Have other Salvadorian immigrants that you've met in your age group, have they served in the U.S. military?

No. No, no, no. But there's always—I didn't see a reason why. I'm escaping and I'm trying to get away from that situation, and I'm going to come to a different country and go into the same

thing that I've been trying...That was my argument. They're like, "Okay." But I had to pay the attorney, and the attorney had to fill out a bunch of paperwork. That's the only thing I remember.

Interesting.

I could have gone to Kuwait because that was Kuwait back then.

Wow. This has been very enlightening. Thank you so much, Leonardo.

No, thank you.

I appreciate you making time for a second session.

It's been a pleasure.

[End of recorded interview]