

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN LOPEZ-CASTILLO**

An Oral History Conducted by Nathalie Martinez

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

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

Director: Claytee D. White

Project Manager: Barbara Tabach

Transcriber: Kristin Hicks, Maribel Estrada Calderon, Rodrigo Vazquez

Editors and Project Assistants: Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez, Maribel Estrada Calderon, 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



**Martin Lopez-Castillo and wife Modesta Martinez at their home in 2020.**

Martin Lopez-Castillo was born in the small town of La Perla, Cuautitlán Izcalli in the State of Mexico. He grew up in a large Catholic family and was taught the meaning of hard work from a young age. Competitive by nature, he excelled in academics and always understood the importance of receiving an education. He left his hometown, immigrating to Phoenix, Arizona, and finally reached Colorado, where he worked as a cook for a Village Inn.

As a lover of travel and adventure, he would often visit Las Vegas—home to his wife’s family—but never imagined living there himself. Then in 2002, he moved his family from Colorado to Las Vegas, where he worked as a miner and landscaper. His determination for producing work that he is proud of has led to the creation of beautiful landscapes, including the garden at a house he owned downtown which appeared in a film after catching the attention of a filmmaker.

Constantly learning, he is a self-taught English speaker with an affinity for cycling, tennis and chess. Over the years he has expanded his collection of chess boards and constantly finds parallels between the chess board and real life. He has a daughter who is an engineer and a daughter who is an architect from his first marriage.

Martin's daughter, Elsa Lopez, is an elementary school teacher for Clark County. She served as a project assistant on the Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada oral history project and participated in this interview of her father.

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January 11, 2020

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Nathalie Martinez, Elsa Lopez, and Barbara Tabach

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**Good afternoon. Today is January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020. My name is Nathalie Martinez. We are here in the home of Elsa Lopez and her father, Martin Lopez-Castillo. In the room with me are...**

*Elsa Lopez.*

***And Barbara Tabach.***

And Martin Lopez.

**May you please spell your name for me?**

M-A-R-T-I-N, L-O-P-E-Z.

**Thank you. How do you identify?**

I am a Mexican.

**From what part of Mexico?**

I'm from the Mexican State, which is next to Mexico City. It's the same name, but Mexican State.

**But not Mexico City.**

Not the capital, not Mexico City, but we are neighbors. Just one street divides Mexico State and Mexico City. At that time, we used to call it *Distrito Federal, D.F.*; now it's *Ciudad de México*.

Yes, I'm from *Estado de México*.

**What city specifically?**

I was born in a little town that belongs to Cuautitlán Izcalli, which is the bigger city.

**Can you spell that for me?**

Let me write it down. It's a long word....

**Cuautitlán Izcalli.**

Yes. But the name of my town is La Perla.

**Tell me about La Perla.**

It's a small town, tiny town, really tiny. I was born there. For me it's the best. I grew up there. I lived there for thirty years until I moved to the United States. I used to know everyone in the town. We only had a grocery store, so if we needed something we had to go to the city, to Cuautitlán Izcalli, or to Mexico City whenever we needed something more.

**How would you get there?**

There is public transportation or I will ask a friend to take me.

**La Perla, was it a rural area?**

When I was born, at that time it was a rural little town. Most of us, we just rode bicycles or not even bicycles. But we were surrounded by cornfields. My dad used to be a rancher, but we also had a little piece of land, and then we grew—well, we used to have corn, beans, alfalfa; all those little things. Then we had cattle. We had horses. There was a river there. It was a really nice place.

**Was it a very happy childhood?**

In a way it was, but my dad, even though he was—he was a really hard worker.

**We can talk about something else right now. It's okay.**

No. He was an alcoholic, so it was really hard for us.

**Us?**

For my brothers and sisters.

*Elsa: How many brothers and sisters did you have?*

I'm the third of fourteen kids.

***Fourteen, wow.***

Yes, fourteen. The first two girls died when they were little. It must have been really hard for them because the first one was three years old and at that time my mom was pregnant. When the first one died, the next day the other one died. Just imagine. My dad was...He was a good person, but anytime when he was drinking, he was the worst.

**Tell me about your siblings.**

Like I said, right now I'm the oldest. I used to take care of them, because, well, I was the oldest. The next one, the second one right now, he was my dad's favorite. Anytime that he did something wrong, I was the one that always took the punishment. As of today, my dad and my brother don't speak to each other even though they were really, really close. I don't know what happened. But, yes, it is hard for me to remember all those things.

Right now, they are doing really good. Most of them have their own business. They had a chance to go to school. I went a little, but not as much as they did. We get along except for the one, but the rest we are really good friends. We talk to each other. My family likes to party a lot. They celebrate everything, like birthdays. There is almost a party every week over there.

**What are the parties like? What is there to eat?**

They all bring different dishes because now all my sisters are married. They'll bring *mole*. They'll bring different kinds of meats.

**What's *mole*?**

*Mole* is a combination of many things. It really is many things, like twenty ingredients or more that becomes kind of a paste. Sometimes it's really spicy, but you can make it not too spicy. That's a tradition for all the parties, to bring *mole* and *carne asada* and all those things. Then they dance a lot. I don't know how to dance, but all my brothers and my sisters, they are really

good dancers. For me to dance I need to drink a beer and then I start dancing and nobody can stop me. I'm a little bit shy in the beginning, but later I'm just...

**Like salsa, cumbia?**

Cumbia mostly.

**You mentioned earlier that you had some time in school. What was school like for you growing up?**

My mom told me that I started walking at nine months old and also, I started talking at that same age. I really like school. Then she said that I would go even taking a piece of sheet and a stake, like a pencil, and I wanted to go to school and they didn't let me. When I was accepted, for me school was easy. I always was the best of the class. But at that time, we had only three grades in my little town, so I was sent to a bigger school. I had to ride my bike for half an hour to get to that school. See, at that time in my town we were not rich, but we were kind of...

*Elsa: Middle class?*

Well, my dad was probably the richest, but we were not rich. Out of the little town, there were some others that were really bad. When I was sent to the other school, then I met kids really rich that had cars—well, not them, but their parents. We never had a car when I was a kid. At first I thought we were in a good position, but then when I saw the others, I thought, oh man, we're poor.

**How old were you?**

I went to that school when I was eight years old, eight to twelve.

**Do you remember the name?**

Yes. Antonio Castle was the name of the school, and then my first was *21 de marzo*; that was the name of that school.

**What was the significance of the twenty-first of March?**

There are two meanings. The first meaning is when Benito Juárez was born. Benito Juárez was one of the biggest persons in Mexico. The other is the beginning of spring most of the time for us. Sometimes it's the 20<sup>th</sup>, but other times it's the 21<sup>st</sup>. It was those two meanings. The name of that school was to honor Benito Juárez when he was born, *21 de marzo*. The other one was Antonio Castle and that guy was a teacher. He was a writer. He was not as well-known as Benito Juárez. Also, in that school I was always the number-one. That was the elementary.

Then I was sent to secondary school. There I met even richer people, the kids of bankers, of doctors, of engineers. I never had money with me. They just gave me enough money to pay for the fare of the bus. It was hard seeing that the rest of the people at lunchtime were buying stuff and I couldn't. It was okay. Also, I was always on top of the class. My dad could afford that.

Then we tried high school, but I only studied it because there was not enough money. While I was in high school, I was with junior people, and then I used to give them the answers of the test, and they used to give me money, so I started making money.

***Barbara: You were smart.***

**Yes. That sounds like something my dad would do.**

When they needed to know something, they always asked me.

**What kind of things did you have to do at home? Did you have chores?**

Yes, I had to take care of the cattle. I told you that my dad was an alcoholic, but he used to drink beer, but mostly there is this beverage that you get out of agave, not tequila; it's called *pulque*.

He drank every day, every day, so he was violent every day. I had to go get the liquid thing. You

know what an agave is? What they do is they take the middle of the plant, and then there is a liquid that starts collecting out of the plant. Then they ferment it and they drink it.

***Barbara: It's like moonshine? They make their own?***

Yes. And it was really cheap.

***Yes. It was potent, yes.***

But it's a really nasty beverage. It's something not as liquid, some kind of...

*Elsa: Thicker consistency?*

Yes, it's of thick consistency. It's bad. When you get the liquid out of the agave, it's really sweet and you can drink it and nothing happens to you. But when you let it rest for a few days, then it becomes *pulque* and that's what he used to drink. There was no day that...He would mistreat my mom.

***Barbara: Describe your mom. This is a woman who is always having babies, my goodness.***

Mom is the best for you. I was kind of mad at my mom because she was such a nice lady, and then I kept telling her that she needed to leave my dad, and then she never listened. My dad was bad. Sometimes he was killing her; he was choking her. I would have to...

***I imagine that's a burden especially for the oldest boy trying to protect your mom.***

*And all the other kids.*

Yes. My dad was always fighting with me.

***But your mom stayed.***

Yes, she stayed. A lot of times...

*Elsa: What else was she like, Dad?*

My mom was a very, very intelligent person, very intelligent woman even though she went only for a few months to school. She told me that her mom, my grandma, didn't want her to go to

school. There was a time when they got forced to send the kids to school because the government allowed. But before that if you wanted to send the kids to school, you could; if you didn't want, you didn't send them. She said that she liked school so much, she really loved it that she would say to the teacher, "Hey, give me more homework. I want more homework."

Yes, her mom just kept her at home. She didn't have friends. She was not allowed to go to parties. She was always kept at home. I guess when she first met my dad, it was the first guy that she met and she went with him. She got married at a really young age; she was like fourteen years old.

***How old was he?***

He was eighteen.

***They were babies themselves.***

At that time, it was kind of normal over there to get married at that age.

**What year was it approximately?**

My dad was born in '38, so eighteen years from that, so in the fifties. Of course, once they got married my dad was controlling my mom all the time. He's been a controller his whole life. Even today he controls the whole clan. I hate to say this, but I didn't like my dad. We talk right now, but he wants to be right all the time. He doesn't allow you to go against what he is saying. But they are in good shape still. They are in their eighties. They are both still alive, thank God. My mom has been with him all her life.

*She is so small, but she still does all of the housework. She cooks.*

She is really active.

***That's what keeps her alive.***

My dad, it's hard for him to walk now.

***Did most of the kids stay nearby, near the parents, or did they all leave like you?***

We got kicked out of the house many times from my dad.

**Your mom and your siblings?**

Yes. At that time, we were only three, but, yes, we were at night looking for a place to stay. That's why I kept telling my mom. Then I told her, "Once I start working let's just go to a different place." She never listened to me. Many times my dad just threw me out of the house, and I didn't want to go back, but my mom...I did it for my mom. Yes, it was hard, but I think it was harder for my sister, the oldest, because we were seven brothers and seven sisters, but the oldest of them had to stay next to the door of their room just hearing if everything was all right or if my dad was hitting my mom. When that happened—we had kind of a big house—my sister would go get me and then I had to go inside and start...

**Was your family religious?**

Yes, yes. I don't understand that because we had to go to church. At that time we had to kiss the priest's hand. My uncles, my aunts, my grandma, my dad—I never kissed my mom's, but we had to do it. You had to listen like this; you could not look at their eyes.

**At church or at home?**

No, at home. If my uncle was telling me something, I had to just...

**Bow your head.**

Yes.

*Was that part of the religious aspect, or was that—*

That was part of it, yes, because—

**Out of respect?**



Yes, out of respect. We were not allowed to say any bad words, but my dad always used really bad words, and my uncles, but we couldn't say them because we would get punished. I didn't use any bad words until I was fourteen. They always told me that I was going to go to hell, so I thought that was true.

**Did you do your First Communion and Confirmation and everything?**

Yes, yes. We had to pray in the morning. We had to say our prayers at night. That was only for me. I don't remember my brothers doing that. I was the only one that was asked to do those things. Yes, they were kind of strict with me. Then when I was thirteen I couldn't take it anymore, so I became really rebellious. We were really close to fight, my dad and I. The thing is that he was a boxer, he was a wrestler, he was a big guy, really big guy. Everyone over there, they were afraid of him because he always wanted to fight. For a minimal thing he wanted to just fight. With me he would treat me like I was not his son. He would throw punches at me. I just had to dodge them because one of them and I wouldn't be saying that. He was a really powerful guy. That's it.

The other side, when he was not drunk, he was, like I said, a really hard worker. Even though we didn't have many things, we always had what we needed. We always had a roof. We always had our meals.

**What were the meals like with all of your siblings?**

It was hard. Like I was telling you, when I was at my first school, for us it was only one meal. It could be just soup and that was it, or it was beans and that was it, or a little bit of meat once in a while. When I went to the other school, I learned that they had two-course meals, like soup and then the main course. We never had that. We ate most of the time beans, tortillas, and chicken. We always had milk because we had cattle. We ate eggs, pork, lamb. We had all those things.

When my dad wanted to have a good meal, he would go ahead and kill one of the animals. We ate things out of the fields, like little plants, little weeds.

**How old were you when you started working?**

I worked all my life. Probably I was three or so and they would take me to the fields to help.

**What did you do on the fields?**

We would get the corn out of the husks. We would get the weeds. We would carry the straws.

Anything that they did I had to do it. Since I was able to walk, I was helping out in the field.

With the cattle I had to learn how to milk the cows. I don't know how old I was, probably five when I was already milking the cows. I had to go get the pasture for them. I had to clean them, to wash them, to give them a bath. I had to take care of the cattle since I was little because my dad had a different job and he would leave in the morning, and I had to stay and get all those things done before going to school. I went to school, and then when I was back I had to do again all those chores.

**How old were you when you stopped going to school?**

I was seventeen the last time I went to school, so I stopped for two years and started working, and then I went back to school, but then I couldn't. See, the other thing is that my mom was always in debt because my dad would give her money, but it was never enough. I had to work and give all my money to my mom.

*Dad, can you tell us about that scholarship you got once at school? That was pretty prestigious, wasn't it?*

At my first school I was sent to that bigger school because they said that I had good grades. At that other school if you were good, you could go see the president and then they'll give you a scholarship, so you had to be the best of the school. But the thing was that there were some—I

think that that was the reason—there were two kids that were related to the principal at that school. They gave us a test and I got better grades than them, but for some reason that year nobody went to see the president. I got the grades to go, but, no, they didn't send me. Whoever went to see the president, they'll get a scholarship for what you were going to study next, but, no, I didn't get it.

**When you finished school what was your first job?**

I was at school and I was working. I was helping one of my uncles; he was a bricklayer, so I was his helper. I used to help some others that needed a hand for this or a hand for that, and then I would get money and all that money was for my mom because, like I said, she always had to get some of the things that we needed. She would go to the grocery store and she would get credit, and then when she got the money, then she'll go and pay, but most of the time she was really behind. I gave all my money to my mom. In the beginning it was very little, but then when I started working full-time, we started paying all the debts that we had. When I saw that she was in no debt, then I started buying stuff for me. I bought my first bicycle and then I bought my uniform because I always like to play soccer. My dad was one of the best soccer players over there, and he never bought me a ball or shoes or anything. I don't know why. I had to work in order to get those things.

**What other jobs did you have? Were you always working in La Perla?**

No, I had to leave. I went to a different bigger town. They used to do these things...where people die. How do you call them? You know the tombstones, the *lápids*?

***The headstones?***

The headstones, yes, they used to do those things. That was my first main job. I did that for a few months until one day I saw this “help wanted” at this factory and then I started working for a factory.

**What was the factory for?**

They used to make the meters for gas, those big things, the gas. They used to do the whole thing, so I started working for them.

**What were the conditions like in the factory?**

It was good. It was a brand-new factory. But before that it was bad for the old people. They used to tell me that they didn’t have enough ventilation and there was always bad conditions. But that one that I was working, everything was fine. We had showers. It was a nice, brand-new factory. It was from Germany. It was German. They always paid us overtime and everything that the law said. We always got that. The conditions were good.

*Elsa: Can I ask, Dad, what did you like to do for fun when you were older, at that point in your life?*

I always loved soccer. I always thought that I could be a professional if I had the chance because my team won all the time. We were good.

**Did you guys have a name?**

Yes.

**What was it?**

Cosmos. Many teams from other towns would go to play against us, or we go to play against them, and then we always won. See, we were eighteen and younger and nobody could beat us until they said eighteen and older. The first game that we played, we tied, but then later, yes, we got beaten. But we were good. Some of my cousins were really, really good, but they also liked

to drink. Two of them had a chance to become professionals, but since they were drinkers they couldn't. Teams from the mayor division, they were looking for and then they didn't go.

**What was it that you liked so much about the sport?**

What do you mean?

**Was it just the team aspect or...?**

My thing is that I've always wanted to compete. I know that sounds bad, but I always wanted to win.

*Elsa: Just like in school, you always needed to be the best.*

Yes. Also, I liked cycling. See, this I really loved it, but I didn't have a bike. When I could afford a bike, I could go from five in the morning to seven at night.

**Nonstop?**

Just stopping to get my meals. I would travel through five states in a week. I would go back and forth. I would take a week of vacation and then I would...on a bike. When I first came to the States—we used to live in Arizona—I always wanted to go from Arizona to my hometown on a bike.

**Did you ever get to do it?**

No, no. When I was back home, I used to go to many, many places. Actually, I visited most of the Mexican states, most of them. We have thirty-two. Probably four I didn't go, but the rest I did.

***Barbara: What did you learn about yourself from biking that far and that many places?***

I learned that when I wanted to do something I would do it. See, also I liked to run. One time I wanted to participate in a marathon. One of my friends was practicing and he told me. I thought, well, I'm just going to give it a try. Then I started practicing. When the day came, like three days

before that date, I got sick. I had a fever. I had a bleeding nose. I was coughing. But I still went. Out of ten thousand or something people, the first three places got money and all that. They would give different prizes for the first hundred. Even though I was sick, I was in the first hundred. My friend that was training all the time, he didn't even finish. When I wanted to do something, I would do it. That day when I finished the race, I was about to die. Everything on me was...I was destroyed. But, yes, I finished it.

***Did you ever run another marathon?***

No, because I had to do different things. I started working and I didn't have a chance. Then I got married.

***What year did you get married?***

I was twenty-four. This is my third marriage. I'm not proud of it, but that's how things happened. One of the reasons I moved to the States was because I went through a divorce. When I moved here, it was not that I needed to come here. Once I started working, everything was working fine for me. I started making money. I had my own little company.

***Tell us about your company.***

I owned my house; when I was twenty-three, I already had a house. I had everything that a house could need. I always told myself, "I'm not going to be as poor as I was." In a way, I always wanted to show off. I had the biggest house in my town. I tried to buy the best TV, the best of everything. We could afford going on vacation four or five times a year. I had people working for me. But then things started going bad because of me. It was my fault. I lost everything. I had to pay the lawyers this and that, and then I was almost broke. Once I heard someone talking about—well, that person was living here and I heard that he's saying that—because I never wanted to come here.

***When you say “here,” the United States?***

Yes. I never thought I was going to be here. I was almost broke, but I had enough work and I could recover. But this guy told me if I wanted to come. I always was amazed about the things I read about this country, so I wanted to go to Disneyland. When the guy said that he was living here, I told him if I could come, and then he said, “Yes, this is what the fare’s going to be.” I paid him. Months past and I thought probably he had forgotten, but one day while I was working there is this guy that told me, “Hey, you’re leaving today.” I left everything. At that time I brought with me—I remember the amount of pesos. It was four million pesos. It was not a lot in dollars. I brought that with me. I just thought, I’m going to stay fifteen days there and see how things are in the United States, and I’ll just buy my ticket back. No, I never went back again.

***You never went back.***

Well, it took me a year, but I stayed.

***Where did you land?***

The first time I came here was Arizona, in Phoenix. Then in Phoenix I met Elsa’s mom.

*Can you tell us about that—*

**Before we get there, though, from where did you leave in Mexico? Did you live in La Perla until then?**

Yes, and then I left from there.

**How did you get from La Perla to Phoenix?**

I had to go to Mexico City and then we had to travel from Mexico City to Sonora.

**Bus?**

To Nogales.

***On a bus?***

On a bus, yes. Then we paid a taxi from Nogales to Phoenix.

***Was it hard to get across the border at that time in Nogales?***

No.

***I remember going back and forth in Nogales myself.***

It was not hard at that time.

*Dad, what year was it, though?*

That was 1993. It was easy. In a way it was hard because when I was living over there, I always someone that cooked my meals, that washed my clothes, and I had a house. When I got here I had to cook my meals, and I didn't even know how to cook an egg. I didn't know. In my family, guys went to work and girls stayed home. I never did my bed. My sisters had to make my bed. They had to wash my clothes. They had to cook my meals. I had to go to work and bring the money. When I got here I didn't know.

**Where did you live when you got here?**

Phoenix.

**But where? With a friend, a family member?**

With that friend. We were fifteen in a two-bedroom apartment. Then I used to sleep... They had bikes and then they'd put it like this against the wall. In the space underneath the bikes that was my bed. I was there and I didn't even know how to use a washing machine. When it was time to go wash my clothes, I didn't know how to do it. Then I saw that they knew how to fold the shirts, the pants. I just grabbed them and then I took them.

***You learned by watching other people do it.***

Yes. For me it was new, learning how to cook. I remember that I was the only one that didn't know how to cook out of the whole group.



**Were they all from Mexico?**

Yes. Since I was the only one that didn't cook, I had to wash the dishes. Just imagine fifteen.

They would get a cup to drink and then leave it there, and a plate and leave it there, and so it was always a pile of dishes I had to wash, but it was fine. When I started working I only worked for a few hours. I was the last to leave the apartment and the first to get to the apartment, so I'd have to do all the vacuuming. I had to do all the cleaning until I got tired of doing that. Then when I started making money, I just went to Burger King. Then I said, "If I have to do all this just for this meal, no, I'll go and buy my own." No, you have to learn. I went from having almost everything to having nothing. Then I met Elsa's mom.

**Where did you meet her?**

The name of the city is Tempe; we met there. One day I was at my apartment and she was with some other friend and they came visiting. I saw her and it was love at first sight. Also, she was new here in the States, so we didn't have things, but it's been really nice. It's been probably my best time since I met her because we had Elsa and—

*And we're glad that happened. I'm very selfish on that too. I want to just fill in a couple of things here. Elsa did start to ask this a while back. You have a very fascinating life story. If you could talk about the business you had in Mexico that you left behind and then the first job and when you woke up in Arizona. Can you talk about that a little bit?*

My job history in Mexico most of the time was factories until one day one of my brothers—he used to work in this marketplace. It was a street market where they sell all kinds of things, fruits, vegetables; all those things. One day he told me if I wanted to go help him, but I already had my job. He used to make more money over there than what I was making, so I just quit my factory job and started working there. What we did is...It was a street market and all the vendors would

bring their products and sell them, but we would build the things where they put their stuff in the morning, so when they got there everything was ready.

***The booth space.***

Yes. We would do that in the morning, and then at the end of the day we would take everything apart and load it in big trucks and go to a different place the next day. There were seven different places. Monday was one place and then Tuesday...All week. In order to be able to assemble the whole thing, I needed helpers, so that's why I started bringing people from my town. We were in really faraway places. We had to travel almost a couple of hours, an hour, half an hour; it depends on how far away was the place. I was making really good money.

***And then, poof, you just leave that.***

Yes. When my friend told me hey, I left everything.

***Your next adventure starts.***

Yes.

*Dad, how did you prepare for the U.S.? Did you have anything you needed to do?*

When I learned that the guy was going to take me, I had this little book about English. It was only about the colors, saying *sky* and *snow*. Then I knew those. In thought I knew English. When I got here and I started listening to people, I couldn't understand them, not a single thing. I just couldn't. Since I was the newest in that apartment, I thought that all the rest spoke English, and none of them did.

**How long had they been here?**

For a few years.

**Were they all men in that apartment?**

No. there was a couple and one more girl. That couple, they were always fighting. One time the girl called the police. Since all of us were illegal then, we had to leave. That night we had to sleep on the street.

**But they didn't send you to...?**

No. The police came and they took the guy and then he was in jail. We slept—well, I didn't have a car, but my friend had a car. We slept in the car and then came back the next day.

***What was your first job? Do you remember your first day of working in the United States?***

My very first job was helping a guy that I used to tend horses. We would go and then clean the horses.

***You were good at that.***

It was easy. Then there was another guy looking for a worker and that was a concrete guy. I also knew him. See, the guy wanted me to stay with him. When I work, I work. He really liked me. But, see, the other thing was that it was raining and that kind of job you couldn't do it because you couldn't, so I had to go to another guy. He told me that he was going to save that place for me, but in the meantime, I could go find another job. I met this guy that used to do landscaping. I started doing landscaping and then I never went back to concrete. Landscaping, I did it for almost three years in Phoenix. Then I moved to Colorado and over there I was a cook.

**What was the restaurant?**

I worked for many restaurants.

***I love this. You actually became a cook and you were a man who didn't know how to cook an egg. That's great.***

Yes. I started as a dishwasher. Then they kept telling me, “Why don’t you become a cook?” I told them, “I don’t even know how to cook.” “We’ll teach you.” Then I did it one day and I became a cook.

***What kind of restaurant was it?***

It’s like all-American. The name was Village Inn.

***Did you make pancakes?***

Yes. Then I worked for Sherry’s and Chili’s and another little restaurant called B&B Café.

Believe it or not, I became the best cook they ever had.

***I do believe it. I don’t question that you would become the best. I really don’t.***

**That makes two of us.**

Because we were many and the servers would put their tickets on my side. No, seriously.

***I do believe you.***

**Yes.**

***I do believe you. I’m not kidding.***

The other guys had a lot of experience. I didn’t have...almost no experience. Probably what they liked is that I tried to put things like knives and they liked it. They got better tips. Then when I started getting faster, then everyone wanted me to be theirs.

***Village Inns are popular still in the Midwest. I’m from Iowa originally and the Village Inns I know are from Iowa and Colorado and all that. That’s good.***

One day there was a reunion of the best cooks from Village Inn. We used to live in this place. I don’t know if you’re familiar with Castle Rock, Colorado. They told me that I was going to be sent to work with those guys. Then I thought, oh no, what am I going to be doing with them?

Well, I went and then we started and don’t you know I just take my vest for them to—because I

thought, well, they're going to think that I'm a poor place. No, they really liked me. Then I don't know if you remember there used to be a line of people waiting and it was a really fast-paced restaurant. You had only minutes to prepare a meal. Then you had to work really fast, fast, fast. Working fast that was always my thing. I always wanted to do fast, fast, fast. Then I became famous over there. Then I was really famous. See, the other thing, I wouldn't say it because my daughter is here, but I was kind of popular with ladies, and then sometimes I just did things I shouldn't have done.

***We all have done that.***

Then I started liking being a cook.

***That's great.***

Yes. All my wife's family members, they all live here. Over there we didn't have no family members. Of course, myself, I never had a family member, just one time that one of my brothers came, but he was here for a half a year and then went back. One day we decided to move to Las Vegas. But we used to come here on vacation. Also, I never thought I was going to be one day living here.

**I don't think anyone does.**

***I didn't, either.***

See, for me, since I always liked traveling, Las Vegas was nice because of the casinos, but the rest of the city for me was really ugly, the mountains with no trees and the heat. Compared to Colorado, it was like, no, no, there is no way. But now I am happy here. Many people, they have asked me if I would like to move, and for now probably not. I'm really happy.

*Why do you like it?*

I like the people. I like the weather even though sometimes it gets really hot. But I got used to it.

**What was your first job when you got here?**

It was a really big transition from being a cook. Then I started doing landscaping. The first thing I was doing, my first day I was working with a shovel and a pick that I had my hands...they were destroyed. I even had a fever that day. Then I was like, what am I—

**Was it during the summer?**

Yes, it was in June. I was, what am I doing here? I was having a really good life over there. What am I doing here? I should go back. No. Then I just kept working and then I stayed. But, yes, I was a landscaper for a while, and then I was washing windows.

**Where?**

All over the city.

**In the casinos?**

No. Yes, we did a few casinos, but most of the time we went to the houses of rich people.

*Residential.*

Yes. One time I worked for this mining company way out there and it was really nice; no cars over there; no noise.

***Which mining company?***

It takes like an hour and a half from here.

***Is it south of here?***

Yes, going towards California. Well, you get to Primm and then you make a right and you go through the mountains. It's in the middle of the mountains.

*Dad, what year did we get here? What year did we move here?*

Two thousand two. Over there I used to maintenance all the big machines that they had, change the oil, change the air filters, and put the salt to the trucks. I really enjoyed it. They paid me good, but then business started going slow.

**What were they mining?**

It was many things, but mostly...Do you know what flagstone is? They'll get those things to make decorations. At Red Rock Casino, all the flagstone on the façade came from that mine. Then they'll take big boulders to put in front of businesses, or they'll write the name of the business on the stone. They will do many things. Gravel, they'll crunch all the big rocks and then make them smaller. All the little gravel that you see in those houses, a good part came from that mine.

**Do you know what the name of the mine was, or the company?**

I don't remember exactly, but I can find out.

**Thank you.**

I always thought about what if one day I find a little gold? I was always looking for something.

No, I never found it. But it was really nice.

*What parts of the city did you work on when you were doing landscaping?*

All over the city.

*Can you tell us about some parts that you helped restore, maintain? Like what you tell me, like you were always driving around and you would say, "Oh, we did this; we did that."*

We did many, many, many houses, but the ones I liked the most are the ones located in Anthem Country Club where the rich people live. We would work for days in the house that it was looking bad, and then when we left it was...One time I worked for this guy, he was so particular. Everything that we did he would look at. Even a boulder he'd say, "Turn it this way. No, that

plant, let's put it this way." Yes, he was really good. When I worked with him, people loved it. He was really good.

*What's the name of the company?*

That was Ed's. The name was Shore Ready; that was the name of the company.

*How long were you with Ed?*

I was with him for probably three years.

**Were you ever mistreated?**

No. Not really, no. They were really nice, always nice to me.

**At the company?**

The owner? The owner, he was really nice to me.

**And the people that you would do landscaping for, did they ever mistreat you or be rude to you at all?**

That happened to me when I was in Phoenix, but that was not from people from here, but from our own people. It's sad saying it, but our own people are the ones that discriminate the most.

**Against what?**

Against—because since they were here longer, they always see you like you were nothing.

*Dad, are you happy about—*

**Even though they used to be in that position.**

Yes, when they were first hired, they were that way. But, yes, they...

**What did they do?**

They would call you names. They even called us wetback even though they were wetbacks themselves.



*Dad, do you think that some people who were documented were sometimes unfair or mean to those who were undocumented? Was that ever an issue?*

Oh yes. We knew many that they were residents or citizens that would say, "I'm going to call *la migra* on you." Yes. And, "If you don't do this..." We got a little bit abused. Some of them, they'll leave the very next day because they say, "Tomorrow I'm calling *la migra*." They never did, but they'll say it, yes.

**That was all in Arizona?**

Yes. Never here.

*Dad, then when did you start gardening?*

I started here. When the mine started slowing down, we were ten that they had to let go. I started looking for a job and then I started being a gardener and I've been a gardener for a long time. See, we used to live at this other house, and that house was such a pretty house. Every day I would try to make it look nice. We had flowers. We had fountains. We had a treehouse.

*What did it look like in the beginning?*

In the beginning it was trash.

**Where was this house?**

Downtown. People used to walk through the house, not going around, so I had to build a fence. Then the people that used to live there before us, they left all kinds of...it was trash. Then my wife and I and the kids, we started fixing it. At one time at the peak of the good time of the house, people go and take pictures of it.

*Tell her about what happened with the guy in the movie.*

They even filmed a movie in that house.

**In the house?**

In the house.

*And they paid us, too.*

They paid us.

***What movie was that?***

What's the name of the movie?

*I have it in an email somewhere that I can look up, but it was a foreign movie.*

***Look it up. Cool.***

We were famous over there. We were famous. They had all the equipment, the cars.

**How did they find your house?**

They were scouting and then they liked it.

**What did they like about the house for the movie in particular?**

I don't know. The house was always clean and it was always full of flowers. I don't know if that's what they liked.

*That is what they liked.*

It was full of flowers. Like I said, I had a lot of fountains always working, so you will drive by and they will just keep watching and hearing the sound of water. I had all kinds of things there.

All my wife's family, they'll go and then we'll party a lot. We'll celebrate everything over there, like quinceañera, like birthdays; everything they'll go. In a way, I didn't like it because at the end of the party my grass was destroyed and I had to start all over. But it was a really, really, really nice house. One day I'm going to make this house look like that one.

***It must have been hard to leave it.***

It was hard, but it was small. It was smaller than this. The area was kind of not a good area.

There was a lot of homeless people. We changed...

*The demographic of that area.*

Yes, because now the family members started moving around us. Now we started playing soccer over there and listening to Mexican music over there and partying. And then our parties were always almost alcohol-free, so we were not...because we had a few neighbors that were white and we tried not to bother them. We always tried to be good neighbors with them and they liked us. They would go to our parties. There was this guy, he was a Marine. At first, I always thought that he did not like me because he was always mad, but at the end we are like best friends.

**Are you still friends?**

Yes, we are still friends. He really had bad times and he always came to me for help. He always needed money and he always paid me back. I can find that note when he wrote me a note, the best note that I ever got. I'm going to look for it. People really liked us over there. We've always been trying to be good neighbors. If we could help with things that they needed, we always helped. I've been like that all my life. See, I remember when I was back in Mexico and I had extra money, there are people in the street sometimes begging and especially when they are mom and they have their kids, I'll go and give them money. I've been like that.

**For the parties that you had did you keep the similar traditions in the parties that you had in Mexico, like the *mole*? Would you keep some of those traditions alive?**

Yes, we always had kind of the same, the enchiladas, *mole*, *barbacoa*. You know what *barbacoa* is? We always tried to drink the Mexican sodas and listen to Mexican music. A few times we tried to celebrate the Posadas. You know what a Posada is?

**Yes. Can you explain what they are?**

A Posada is a tradition. We tried to remember when Virgin Mary was with Joseph and she was still pregnant and she wanted a shelter, so that's what we do; we have a person that's like the Virgin Mary.

**Reenactment.**

Yes. Then they go to the houses asking for shelter. Here we didn't do it the way we did it in Mexico.

**How is it in Mexico?**

We'll have little figures, like the ones that we have over there under the tree, and then we'll take it and go to a specific house and then ask for shelter, but singing. We would sing things. Stop at the door of the house and then we'll start asking for shelter, but singing. Then the ones inside, first they'll say, "No, go away," but we'll keep begging, and at the end they'll let us in and they'll give us all kinds of things, candy, coffee, food, fruit. We'll break piñatas, very nice. That's nine days, so we go the next day to another. In my town the whole street will do one Posada, the first one, and then another street will do another one. Everyone on that street will give something for the rest of the people that are with the little pilgrims.

**What were some of the hobbies that you had or still had, I should say?**

When I was a kid, I used to make airplanes with clay. Even though I was smaller than the rest, the big ones, they'll tell me, "Make me one; make me one," so I'll make airplanes and I'll put the little engines, the little tires, the little things, and let it dry, and then they'll play with them later. Then I'll make helicopters. I make dinosaurs. I really enjoyed doing that.

But then later I started learning how to play chess.

**Where did you learn how to play chess?**

See this? This happened by an accident one day. There was a raffle at my school and I won a little chess set. Then I didn't know how to play it, so I had to ask, and nobody knew. One day I found a little book and I started reading it and I learned it. But there was no one to play with until I found a guy that knew how to do it, but he was really good, so he always beat me. Then at one point I thought, no, I'm not good at this. I'm not good, but I kind of know. But then I loved the game so much that we would stay the whole night playing, the whole night. Next day even though it was a workday, we'll go to work without sleep because we were so into it.

**When did you start collecting them?**

At that time, my chess was plastic and really chipped. I always thought, one day when I have enough money, I'm going to buy marble. I never got one. But one day I found this good chess set and I bought it, and from then I started collecting and collecting, and now I have many, many. I have given many to people that like to play.

**What is it that you like so much about it?**

You have to concentrate and you have to have a strategy. You have to not make mistakes and really be focused. Then I learned that in real life you can apply the chess thing towards life.

**How?**

You have to try to not make a lot of mistakes because a mistake can lead you to lose everything. In chess if you make a mistake, you lose the game. In life if you make a really bad mistake, then you can end up losing everything else.

*Do you remember the time that one of my friends said that he could beat you at chess?*

Yes.

*He did not show any mercy; my dad just owned the floor.*

I have met a lot of people that they have told me that they were going to....and, no. There are people that know more than me. But the thing I really like the most is playing tennis.

**You play tennis.**

Yes. When I first started playing tennis, we couldn't afford a tennis racket.

**This is in Mexico?**

Yes. We had to make our own wooden rackets. Our church had a really big empty lot, and then I went and started cleaning it, leveling it, and making it look like a tennis court, and then we started playing there. I would bring the kids. It was such a good time. One day when I could afford to buy a tennis racket, then I bought one and I didn't use it; I just had it. It was too much just for me to get—well, I bought two. We used it only a couple of times. But, no, we would use the wooden ones. I kept it and my brother kept them for me. They were there the last time I went and it was years. Then when I moved to the States, since here things were easier to get, I have had I don't know how many. Anytime I see a racket I want to buy it. I really enjoyed playing tennis since I first started up till this time.

**Elsa mentioned to us that you are in the process of earning your GED.**

Yes. I have procrastinated years and years.

*Years. Decades.*

**When did you first want to try and get your GED?**

Well, let me tell you a really quick story. One day I thought, well, I'm just going to go to the library and I'm going to ask how I can get it. I went and the lady said, "First I need to know what your level is to see how long it's going to take you."

**Was that here in Las Vegas?**

No. It was in Arizona. I went and then she gave me a test and I only failed one question.

***Was this in English, the test?***

Yes. Then she said, “You’re ready to get it.” And I thought, no, I don’t think so. The test was not hard for me, but I think I’m not going to be able to make an essay. I’m not good at doing that. In order to get it you have to...Probably that’s the thing that’s been holding me back. The lady said, “You’re ready for it.” I just didn’t do it.

Then when we moved here I also went with this friend of mine. We went to the library. They said, “Well, we’re going to test you.” Over there were Chinese people, black Americans, white, Mexicans. We were about twenty. They gave us the test. That day I brought a notebook with me and I made some notes in my notebook. We finished the test and then the teacher started giving the test results. She gave all the results but mine, and then she said, “There is something strange here.” She mentioned my name. “Who is Martin Lopez?” I said, “That’s me.” “I need to see what you have on your book.” I think that she thought I was cheating. I just let her see my notebook. Then she said, “I don’t get it. I have never had this kind of...” I aced it, the test. Then she said, “Come with me next Tuesday and then we’ll go to the real place for you to take it.” I went and she was not there and then I didn’t go back.

***What year was this?***

It was probably ten years ago. Then she started saying, “Hey, when are you going to get your GED?” I think I have forgotten a few things, so I need to refresh.

***Now that you have a teacher in the family, you must accomplish this. I can see that she’s not going to let go.***

Yes, she keeps telling me, “When are you going to get it? When are you going to get it?”

Sometimes I get so busy that—no, that’s probably an excuse.

*Yes. You could just do it.*

***Tell us about your command of English. When you got here, you told us a while back that you know no English words and you learn a few. How did you get to be so skilled at reading and speaking it?***

I still need to learn a lot more.

*You taught English. You need to tell us that story later, too.*

Oh, okay. I just like reading. I like to listen the news, to watch like National Geographic things.

From those things, probably that's why I have learned it. But I wish one day I could master it.

***We're all working at mastering it.***

**Yes.**

***How did you learn to read it and write it, then? Did you take a class?***

No.

***You're totally self-taught?***

Yes. We used to go to this church in Colorado, and I wanted to improve my English, so I heard that they were giving English classes there. I went and also, they test me. Then they said, "No, we need your help to teach the others." I started teaching. At one point, we had probably twenty students, and then she was helping me.

***She being Elsa.***

Yes. I don't know how old she was, but she was in third grade.

*No, Dad. This is in Colorado. I was like five or something.*

Probably, yes. I would take her. All my students, they didn't know; they were really beginners.

What I would do is teaching them the way I learned it, but I wanted Elsa's help for the pronunciation because that's our main problem. You can probably understand it, but it's hard for us to speak it. Since she was born here and then she was...then I'll take her and say, "Just read



this,” and they’ll repeat it after her. I did that for us because also I was learning to say it the right way.

***Since Elsa is sitting here, what do you remember about that experience with your dad?***

*It was so much fun. You would bring me up to the front of the class. Maybe I’m misremembering, but there was almost like there was a platform. I would go to the front of the class, be on the platform, and then I would just read the words out. I remember it was super important to me that I had learned to read really quickly. I can’t believe that even then I felt comfortable enough to read in front of a group of adults.*

All of them were adults.

*But you made sure that I learned to read really recently, and that must have been shortly afterwards.*

I was so proud of her. I never told her, and then I’m going to tell her, yes, I was so proud that that little kid was in front of adults and not being shy and just reading.

***You were preparing her to be a teacher in the future.***

Yes.

To be honest with you, I wanted her to be like a doctor or a lawyer, not a teacher.

***She could still do that. We’re going to plan your life for you.***

Not a teacher. Now that she is becoming a teacher, I’m even prouder. She started at a really young age.

***That’s wonderful. Can you tell us your immigration story? You came, as you described it, illegal, so you’re undocumented. When and how did you get your first documentation?***

No, I’m still...

***You’re still undocumented?***

Yes, I'm still undocumented. See, the thing is since my—well, there are many ways to become a citizen. But the mistake that we made is like many that came here that way; probably they'll seek a partner that has some status here, a resident or citizen. But since I met Elsa's mom and she was in my same condition, now things get more complicated because now there is no way to. Then I had a chance to marry a U.S. citizen, but I never did it. Like I said, if you marry an American citizen, then chances get easier. But in our case, it's really difficult.

*Dad, do you feel comfortable talking to us about the journey over here, the one that was really difficult?*

Yes.

*Can you tell us because that's important?*

It took me ten years to go back. The first time that I came I stayed for a year and then went back. Then I came again and after that I stayed for ten years without going back to see my people. One day I decided to go and I went and I knew it was going to be difficult, but I never thought it was going to be that difficult. I was there and then I did the traveling through Mexico, normal, no problem. But when I got to the border, I ended up in this really bad town that was controlled by *narco* people, like bad people, and they were fighting to get the ones that wanted to cross the border. At one point, we were kind of prisoners, so we were there. You had to obey whatever they were saying; you couldn't say no to whatever they were saying because you could even get killed. We tried the first time, and then we got caught. We were taken back, so we tried again. Out of that group, I was the only one that tried the next day because the rest were really tired because you had to walk all day, and they were in bad shape. But I tried. At that time, I was in really good shape, so I tried. We were about to get to the place where we were going to get picked up, but we got caught again.

***By the narcos?***

No, no. By immigration. But before that there was a rumor that some of those—they were called kidnappers; kind of that. They'll get you and then they will ask for more money. Before you started crossing you kind of would get to an agreement on how much you were going to pay, but once you were in their hands, they'll raise the price, and then you have to pay it or else.

When we were walking someone told us, "Hey, I think someone is following us, and then they're going to try to kidnap all of us and take us who knows where." We heard voices. We were in the middle of nowhere, and then we heard voices. Then we were told just to go and hide and not to make any noises. The other group was approaching and our hearts are...so we did not want to even breathe. They came, but, no, they were another group of immigrants that got lost. Well, we were happy that they were not the kidnappers.

That group had just started the journey, and then we were already tired, but we had to go with them. The people that were trying to cross with us, they got sick, so they just left us in the hands of the other group. We started walking. At one point, we started getting behind because we couldn't walk anymore. There was this girl that really couldn't walk because she was so tired. Then the rest, they just left us. Well, I stayed with the girl, and they just kept going, and then we got behind. I helped her.

But I was prepared. I had my backpack with food, with water, with medicine. I had blankets. I had everything, but she didn't have anything, so I had to be fitting her. We just got left behind, the two of us. We didn't know where to go. It was kind of a miracle that we found them again, we found the group, but now they were tired, too.

It was so cold. It was so cold that the water that I was carrying in my backpack was frozen. The hair, you were sweating and it was frozen. Some of them, the guy that was trying to

bring us here, he had cocaine and he had to give them cocaine in order for them to have energy. Then they were trembling so badly. I had an extra jacket and blanket, so I gave it to this other person for them to be a little bit warmer.

At one point, we thought if we're going to die there—well, I had plenty of food, but, see, I kind of was afraid that they were going to find out I had food and they were going to take it because they didn't have any. They tried to cross with nothing. I was the only one with food. Later we found another group and they had food. They gave me a can of beans, but just with the (ditch) of the can—it was a big can—just the beans that they couldn't get; that's what he gave me. But I didn't need them because I still had my—

***You had supplies of your own, yes.***

But I thought, no, I'm going to just save this; it's going to be my last resource. I have to be escaping the... Since they didn't open the can like—I don't know how they opened it, but they just made a hole and you had to kind of...

***I see.***

And then...

***You scratched yourself.***

Yes. But you had to do it. You had to do it in order to—

***To survive, yes.***

Yes. We were walking and we found human bones, and then we were all tired. Some of them, I heard that they were saying, "Why did we leave our place and probably we're going to die here, like that person?" See, there was a dead person there. At some point you kind of thought that you were going to be next.

But, yes, we made. That girl that was with me, she was a very rich, rich person back in Mexico. She owned a ranch. She was from Acapulco. She owned a ranch. When she left Acapulco, she bought a brand-new pickup. She had all kinds of machinery. She had cattle with workers for it. But she heard about the journey that some people like us took, and then she wanted to know what it was like.

**What?**

Yes. So, she paid. With her was another girl. The rich girl was a little bit chubby. She was not pretty. But the other girl, she was a beauty. We didn't know, but it turns out she was the helper, one of the helpers. She was about to die. She almost died. I'm almost sure that she would have died if I wouldn't have been with her.

*If you left her.*

Yes. Give them water and food. When we were in Phoenix, I learned all that; that she wanted to experience. But she almost died.

***I'm never heard of that. Have you?***

**No.**

Then she told me, but I still didn't know. She told me, "Let me have your phone number." But what for? I never gave it to her. They told me that she was going to come here to Las Vegas and go to the casino and then buy the ticket back to Mexico. Spend some days here on vacation and then go back. She almost didn't make it. You should have seen her. She was all scratched, thorns everywhere. She was all dirty. Then the people that brought us here, they mistreated her so bad. They almost kicked her. They were saying bad words to her. At that time, we didn't know that she had money.

*Dad, how long was the journey from there to Phoenix?*

It took me three days. Out of those three days, two days we were in the middle of nowhere, walking. When I was caught by ICE, since I was always in the front of the group, at one point I thought, well, I'm just going to stay here and then let the ICE people take the rest and I'll keep...I thought because I had money—I had money hidden in my clothes. They would open the thing and then put the...I had a thousand bucks on me. I thought, well, I can pay someone to take me. I was still not near any town or city. I thought, well, what about if I let ICE take them and I stay here and then I get lost, or I don't know if there's any animals, or snakes. At the end, I went back myself and I just said, "Hey, I'm here, too. Take me." But they didn't know that I was ahead, and so if I wanted to stay there, I could have stayed. But, no, I chickened out.

***You turned yourself in to ICE?***

Yes.

***How were you able to separate from them? How did you get away from ICE?***

No, they took us to the detention center.

***And then you escaped the detention center?***

No. They sent us back to Mexico.

***Okay, I got confused. Then you came back again to the United States.***

Yes, I stayed there and the next day I crossed again.

***Now I get it, all right.***

I crossed again and then this time we made it.

**Wow. What was on your mind during all of this to help you get through it?**

I was thinking of them.

***What year was this? Was it 2005?***

It was 2005. See, I thought, no, I'm not going to die here; my family is waiting for me.

*And we hadn't heard from you for weeks.*

Yes.

***You must have been going crazy here.***

*Yes.*

***It still upsets you.***

**What was it like when you saw them?**

At one point I was kind of fearing that I would not...But when I got there—well, my wife, she was really mad.

***I'll bet.***

She didn't talk to me. But, yes, it was so, so...There are no words to describe what I felt when I saw them.

*It was weird because you were really weak and I didn't understand why. You couldn't even walk.*

I lost I don't know how many pounds.

*Yes, you lost weight. I was in fifth grade, so I was ten. Cynthia was probably seven. And you picked me up from school, so I remember seeing you in the hall.*

***That's when you first saw him.***

*And we went to the store afterwards and I didn't understand why you were so tired.*

Yes, I just wanted to lay down and sleep.

*And we kept bringing you places.*

Yes, I was on my last leg.

**That was 2005, and so when did you start getting back in the—**

As soon as I—it took me only a few days to recover. I went back to work.

**Was that when you started gardening again, or was it the mine?**

No. It was landscaping, yes, gardening. I've been doing that since. Now I do work on my own, but I still work for a company.

**Do you think you'll start your own business one day?**

Eventually I'm going to try to start my own.

**Your own landscape business?**

Yes. I started a few years back, but it was when the economy went bad and I lost money. But, yes, I'm going to try to do it again. Yes, things have been good for us.

*Where are we now? As in while we're recording this, we're in a house, so you own a house here now.*

Yes. It's good.

*Yes, it's very good.*

Yes, it's good.

*And then you have the house in Mexico, too, that you guys started building.*

Yes, we have a house. I also have my first house, but my ex-wife lives there. But with Elsa's mom, we have another house. One day, if we get kicked out, we'll go and live there. For me every day when I go out to work there is always that fear.

***What's that like to live with that?***

It's not fun. Like I told you, I like traveling and then we've done it here, but I will always keep thinking, what about if we get caught? What about...and what about? But we're still here.

***Wow, yes, because it's been a long journey that you've had here. But you have a backup plan, your chess play. You're a chess player; you're a very strategic person.***

Listen, I always have tried to have a Plan B, even a Plan C, in case things don't go the way...



*Dad, what was your plan when Cynthia and I were young? What were you guys going to do if something happened then?*

We would take you guys with us. There is no way that we could leave you guys here. I'm not too concerned because if one day that happens, I can start again over there.

***But you must meet people that aren't as adaptable as you. In your work do you find other people who are undocumented who wouldn't be able to survive back in Mexico?***

Yes, yes. For some it would be really difficult. It depends what part of the country you are, there are places that are really, really bad to live in, to go back. In my case my hometown, yes, there is crime, like regular crime, but not as bad as some other places. Before I always wanted to go back, and now it's sad that now I really don't want to go back. But, well, if I have to I'll go.

***I understand, yes.***

**You never had that—for my dad, it's always his dream to go back, to retire there.**

No.

**You want to stay here?**

Yes, I would stay here.

*When did that change?*

Well, now that you're becoming a professional, and then we have our other daughter and for her it's going to be really hard because she doesn't like school.

*It's not that.*

Well, it's going to be harder. She's almost about to start her own life, but we still need to help the other one. Once they are really settled, I don't know, if I could live here, I'll stay here. It's not like I don't like my country, but...

*You're comfortable here.*

If things change in Mexico, if crime is not as bad as now, if politicians get better, corruption diminishes, then I'll go. But now I'll leave my kids here. My other kids over there are professionals now. One of them, she is an engineer. The other one is going to be an architect. She is a teacher. I don't know what my other kid is going to be. At least we have done our best effort to get them started. But, yes, I'm happy here.

***I really admire you and I appreciate you telling your story.***

I apologize that sometimes...Before this, I thought to myself, I'm going to control it, and I just couldn't control it.

*But, Dad, (indiscernible).*

**But it's okay.**

***You're a human being.***

Hearing it, it's bad, but living it, it's terrible. It's terrible. Imagine your mom being...

*Do you have any other stories you want to share, Dad? You have a lot of stories.*

Yes, I could go on and on, yes. I really appreciate the time that you guys have taken out of your routine.

***This is a valuable story, it really is. It's very insightful.***

I could go...If we would have done this in Spanish, it would be all day.

***Why is that? Why do you say that?***

Well, because there are some words that...My English is not that good to describe things. I wanted to try to see if I could.

**You did a great job.**

***You did. Why did you want to do this interview in English? Because we did give you a choice, and I love that.***

I wanted to challenge myself to see if I could.

*I believe that. I appreciate it because I really did fully understand everything. You're very self-deprecating. I don't know how to say it. But you did a very good job describing everything. I certainly felt your anguish and your happiness and your fears. I think this was great.*

*Dad, remember I asked you last night what you thought about our project?*

Yes.

*Can you tell us what you think, Latinx?*

This morning I thought, I'm going to see what it says.

*Oh, you looked it up.*

Yes. There's a lot of information about that.

**About the term *Latinx*?**

Yes, about the term. I like it. Do you know that in Spanish we always have genders? This is masculine, *libro*, and this is feminine, and it doesn't make sense, but that's the way Spanish is. When she told me and I decided to look it up, a lot of people agreed with the term. That term applies for everyone, not just being a man or a woman because there are some others that don't fit that term, and for me that's fine.

Let me tell you that I would like to congratulate what you guys are doing. I really admire you guys for all the work that you've been doing. I hope that since this is going to be documented people read this someday, and then all that is going to be thanks to you guys. Thank you.

**Thank you.**

*Dad, so then, Latinx people in Las Vegas have played a really important role, right?*

Yes, yes.

*That's the other big thing about our project.*

Yes. We have to understand that our people—well, with our roots the numbers are getting bigger and bigger, and we're approaching almost a million, and we're almost 30 percent.

*Thirty-two-ish or so.*

The way it looks, pretty soon white are going to be minority.

**Yes.**

I shouldn't say this, but we are taking our country back. [Laughing]

*Yes, I'm glad you said that.*

***Let's talk history. There is a case to be made for that.***

*Exactly.*

Let me tell you something. There is this thing about white people that some say that you guys are bad, but, no. One of the best people I ever met are whites, really. The things that you guys have done for this country...Let's say that this was still Mexico, we would still be the way we are back there. I admire—

***I appreciate you saying that.***

Of course, history, what can you do? It's not like you can change things.

***Well, we can't change what we are born. It's really interesting for me, since you bring it up, I grew up in an Italian family, immigrants. My grandfather and grandmother, that's all they spoke—my grandfather learned English, but my grandmother didn't. I was biased against because I was an Italian. Someday, I don't know when, I ceased to be Italian American and became white. There were times when other children were not allowed to play with me and my girlfriend, who was also from an Italian background. All of a sudden, I don't know if it was in high school or if it was in college, because I didn't think about it. But that identity...I was***

*really proud of my Italian. I don't know, it changed and I don't know when. This project has made me think more about that. When did it cease to be the minority? You know what I'm saying? Because just like you're saying, the minority is becoming the majority. I just think this identity stuff could be really great. It's an important part of who we are. Yes, it changes. Society is changing constantly.*

Yesterday I was—because I've been nervous all this time about this interview.

*Are you still sweating?*

No. No. Just as I was thinking—

*Dad, before that—because we might need to end it soon, do you want to say anything else?*

If I may, I want to thank you guys for all the things you've done. I hope that whatever you're trying to achieve, you can achieve it. You guys are the best. Thank you. Thank you very much for being with us.

*Thanks, Dad.*

*I loved learning from you. These two are part of a team of young people that I've learned a lot from. Sometimes not such a good time, but I've learned. You know what I mean? You know what I mean.*

Yes, yes, exactly, yes.

*Life has good moments and bad moments, but if you learn from it that's all that matters.*

Yes, yes.

**My last question is: Earlier in the interview you said that one of the things that you saw from the U.S. that you wanted to see was Disneyland. Have you gone to Disneyland?**

*Good question, Nathalie.*

**And did you like it?**

What can I say? Disneyland, we went. But at that time, I never went.

**When you went did you think about the fact that that was one of the things you wanted to do when you got here?**

When I decided to stay here, now my next thing, you know what it was? Go to see the Twin Towers; I always wanted to go and I never had the chance. One time I told my boss, “I need two weeks’ vacation,” because we were going to go. I wanted to travel over there and see them, and then we never went.

*That’s interesting. Why the twin towers?*

One day I was reading this book—this was back in Mexico—about the towers, and at that time they were the tallest buildings. We have a small building over there, probably it’s like half the height, and I thought, what would it be like to see those things...? And it’s so big. Of course, New York and just buildings here.

*You’ve never been to New York?*

No, no. After 9/11 and now they are gone, I just lost interest. But that was one of my goals, to go see the Twin Towers.

*What’s the next thing you want to see?*

Well, I wanted to see San Francisco.

*We did that.*

We went to...And now I would like to go to Alaska.

*Before it melts away.*

Yes.

*Thanks, Dad.*

**Thank you so much.**

Thank you guys. Again, you guys are the best.

**[End of recorded interview]**