

AN INTERVIEW WITH GERRY ROJAS-CANTRES

An Oral History Conducted by Barbara Tabach

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

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

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University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2018

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

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

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

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PREFACE

Born in the poorest part of San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1980, Gerry Rojas – Cantres. Nevertheless, his mother provided him with a private school education. Gerry moved to Las Vegas in 2006.

In Las Vegas he joined other family members and work. He currently is a porter at McCarran Airport. He also became a model for what is possible and proudly talks about his Culinary Union memberships and role as a shop steward.

Gerry is also an example of the multi-cultural blending that exists. Using his own identity that ranges from Black to Dominican to Puerto Rican he describes how these come together in his own life. In addition, he explains how he and his wife, who is a Filipina, are raising their young daughter to embrace her diverse identity. It is a home where she is being taught Spanish and Mandarin, as well as appreciation for world cuisine.

This oral history was recorded during the Covid-19 pandemic and Gerry speaks of its impact.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Interview with Gerry Rojas-Cantres

January 28, 2021

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Barbara Tabach

Preface.....	iv
Child of poor neighborhood in San Juan, Puerto Rico; protective mother who worked in New York City. Father in Miami. Private school education; bilingual. Las Vegas since 2006; job as porter at airport; learning about Union positions, benefits; keeping the union strong. About being a shop steward for the Union; impact of his duties on him.....	1 – 11
Appreciation for different cultures; world traveler. Participation in MLK Parade. About meeting his wife on a trip to Taiwan; she’s Filipina and they have one child; teaching her about cultural diversity; Spanish and Mandarin languages. Talks about his ethnicity, Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Dominican. Cultural blend of foods in their mixed household; Nuyorican term. Identifies as Black, and Latino, and Puerto Rican.....	12 – 18
Life in during the Covid-19 pandemic; airport is remodeling area where he works. Learning to fix things around the house. Mask wearing biggest adjustment. Talks of his experiences with Covid symptoms.....	19 – 21
Describes his adjustment to life in Las Vegas surrounding his Puerto Rican background; his darker complexion and identity as Black. Afro-Caribbean music, raggaeton, hip-hop.....	22 – 24

This is Barbara Tabach with UNLV's Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada project. Today is January 29th, 2021, and I am sitting via a Zoom call with Gerry.

Gerry, give me your complete name and spell it for us, please.

My name is Gerry Rojas; G-E-R-R-Y, R-O-J-A-S.

Thank you. I appreciate that. We always like to start our interviews for this project with knowing a little bit about your ancestry, your family background. Can you tell me where you were born and what your childhood was like there?

I was born in Puerto Rico, in San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico. Pretty much San Juan is like New York City; it's a metropolis. I come exactly from the hood; it was a poor neighborhood. It's a mixed neighborhood (1:26). It's a high concentration of Dominicans. When they immigrate they end up in that neighborhood. These are running jokes, like, hey, this is the capital of the Dominican Republic, so you have an idea of how much people are there. We grew up in that neighborhood. The influence around...I grew up with my grandma, so I always was kind of in a bubble capsule; they don't let me go and mix with somebody in those—even if the family is involved in something, they don't even let me go and approach them. I grew up there. What else I can say?

My mom was in New York. At that time Puerto Ricans immigrate in the '70s, late '60s, a lot of people immigrate to New York. My mom did it late; she did it in the '80s, early '80s after I was born. But I was supposed to grow up in New York City, but my mom decided, this is not the place for you. I don't know if you know New York City back then. It was horrible. It was really bad, really, really bad.

I do know, yes.

I don't know now, but people see the movie from that time and it was really bad, so she decided, you cannot go, no; I'm going to return back to Puerto Rico. She returned back.

I can say I had fun. There's so much activities there. There's so much places to go. I don't know if we still are like that, but back then we were known as party people. We have way too many holidays, so that's why I go to a lot of festivals. We have so many festivals: Coffee festival, mango, pineapple; whatever you can...fruit festivals. One of the cultural dishes is like a tamale, but we call it *pastele*. We have a festival of *pasteles*. You have an idea of how many festivals we have. We just invent whatever. I always went into a bar, a party. My mom was a party person, adventurist, to put it like that more. She take me all around the island... I would say my childhood was pretty adventurous because of that...

What was going to school like for you in Puerto Rico?

The school back in my time was really good. The education was really high. In my case, I went to the private school. Why? Because my mom doesn't want me to go to the public school. Even though the public school was really good, it's not all of them. I think she was more for protecting me, maybe, like she don't want me to get out from school and do whatever I want or cut it; I don't know. But that's part of the story that I heard is that she don't want me to mix with certain people, so she put me in a private school. Perhaps I tried to join in the high school the public school system. Something bad happened in the first week, nothing that had to do with the school, but my mom got afraid and put me back in the private, just more about security stuff.

She really was very protective of you; is that what you're saying?

Yes. I guess because she came from the (6:08); she had that inside. I don't want to go into her past. She just put me on with it. But the education was very good because I take a lot of public education when it comes to English and math and all that. It's a help from the government that

they give, a lot of help, like tutorials, or if you're failing in something. I still can qualify because I was poor. My mom just rather spend that money, not on a car; she spends that on my education. Not because I was in public school, people think I was rich. A lot of people tend to do that.

She sounds like a very loving mother.

Yes. When you're an only child, I guess moms do that.

Yes, they do.

That's what everybody told me. Education was pretty good. I learned English. I learned a lot of things. I'm glad that I had that education there.

How was that to become bilingual? Did you learn Spanish first and then English, or were you learning them both at the same time in school?

No. You start with Spanish, always Spanish. English is just a one-hour class. There's little school, only a few schools, some private schools where you get everything in English, the whole class in English, but those are expensive. The regular schooling over there, they give you one hour every day, or maybe two hours, of English. Later in that time you have public education schools that are fully bilingual, but they're hard to go in because everybody wants to go to it. My English pretty much, I never care about that language. Even my mom may put in my mind I need, I need, I need it. I would kind of react like, eh, no, I don't want to go live in the United States. Because even if we don't know Spanish in Puerto Rico and people say, "I don't know English," we use a lot of English words since we are a colony of the United States. But later in high school, I agree that okay, I need to improve my English, because all my books for school were in English, but my class was in Spanish. Science and math, I had that issue. I struggled a lot in English.

That sounds very challenging.

Yes. I had no choice to improve my English, but it's not like everybody speaks English over there.

Do you think Puerto Rico should be a state?

No. I like my identity. No offense. I'm going to tell that I have a love-hate relationship with the United States because they did a lot of bad to us before I want to be in my independence. With the time it changed my mind. I realized, okay, now, I would say after one governor that we have pretty much sent us into bankruptcy. He pretty much established that path. After that I realized, okay, we're not ready for that. We're not ready for that. In my opinion, I want independence, but have a good relationship with the country, but that's me. I like my identity. I like my sport teams. When they win I feel proud of it. I'm very proud of in the musical industry, we did. Even in the U.S. military when we did, my feeling is United States don't care. It's just as a dollar sign back then, and right now they're still using us, so that's how I feel.

That sounds like an interesting topic to discuss in detail, but we'll move on.

Politics in Puerto Rico is really complicated.

Yes, I see that. I hear that.

They say that we're not even a colony. We are a free state. What do you call it, free? Free state (associated). Even the term is complicated.

I don't understand it completely. I think it's very, like you said, complicated. Do you go back to Puerto Rico often?

No. I used to go maybe every two or three years, but now it's harder to because at my house we're mixed. One is from Asia and I'm from the Caribbean. One ticket is real expensive and the other one is not, so we try to switch.

When did you come to the United States? Was Vegas your first home in the United States, the continent?

As a home-home?

Yes, a place that you lived. A place you lived and worked.

Yes, I did just as me living there. I was supposed to live in Miami, but I only stayed there only four months. I never passed more than five or four months, because my father is from there.

Every summer or every two summers I lived there, too, but just for a few months.

How did you end up here?

I ended up here because of family. The brother of my godmother is like family. He mentioned to me to come to this city. I'm like, nah. Because I am college graduated. There's so much competition over there. I was pretty much born in the wrong era because it was really hard to find jobs over there, a good job over there. I have a job that lasted only eight months, one year. We get to the next one, get to the next one; I was jumping too much. He just recommended to come here. I'm like, I don't know nothing about Vegas. Why am I going to go over there? That's too far. But I did my research on the computer. I check everything. I'm like, you know what? Why not. I've never been in that part of the United States, only living in the East Coast. I see it as an adventure and ended up here.

What year was it that you arrived?

I arrived here January sixth of 2006.

Fifteen years ago. That's a long adventure.

Yes. I still try to go to another city, but for some reason Vegas is still my home. I'm still making it. I have a decent life here. I make the money. I don't have the perfect job, but I make the money. I have a decent life. I have things that I used to have back home. But I have to realize

that I have to because some other reasons. I mean we have a union. We have (15:35). I can say that I'm lucky. To me, I'm in the right place.

I just received your bio form. You're a porter at the airport?

I'm a porter at the airport.

Talk about that job. How did you get that job? What is it like?

I started as a fast food vendor, actually. My best friend when I get here—I got here because of my friend. I came here and I was juggling two jobs, maybe, or three. This person, I met her in the airport because I have another job in the airport, and this person didn't have a place to live. She was given a ride. She heard about me, asked this person who brought me here to Vegas if he had a room. He told her to talk to me. "Okay, let's live together." We lived together. She is from the LGBT community. While we were living there and I was in the other job and I quit, she told me about this other job. She get me there. I never see as good eyes because fast food, hell no. I always grew up with, you're never going to go there; those are really bad jobs. I grew up with that culture. All the people told me, "Go to the hotels." I'm like, "Hell no, I'm not going to go to the hotels. What? Do those jobs? Hell no." I see them as lower jobs, like you don't make money or nothing. I didn't understand nothing of this union thing, how powerful it was here. Yes, I'm a union member since I'm born, I think—no—I think maybe six years old, or seven.

I didn't understand the union, the Culinary Union was a different kind of union. When I find out this job was union and I have benefits, I'm like, okay, I have vacation? What? I have medical? You know what? I'm going to try it for a few months. She hooked me up. I end up...I hate it, but pay my bills. I was looking for another job to move on. I started and I was a casino porter in the hotels. I'm like, wait, what? They pay this? I tried to move, but the economy went down. I started 2008 there, 2009, and 2010 it went down really bad. I stayed there. I tried to

move on, do other things. It never happened. I moved and I was a porter. When I was a porter, everything changed. Everything changed. I started getting involved with the union, too. I started enjoying it. When I started getting involved in the union, I started fixing the problems there and that makes me enjoy it.

Explain that statement: you helped fix the problems where? At the union or in your work?

At my work. Nobody—"Oh, we're union." And the only thing they use the union, just for the medical, but they don't use the other part of "we need to fix problems here," like whatever your boss is doing illegally, illegal stuff, a lot of sexual harassment that happened there, that happened like discriminations against the old. First, with the Spanish there was some discrimination from the Filipino manager, and then when this Latino become the manager, he started discriminating against the Filipino people. I was very bothered by all that and eventually I got involved trying to help my people—my coworkers. I always say I don't even care anymore about none of them, but it's bothering me so much to see all that that they're messing with people that they don't do nothing to nobody, so I get involved with the union. We found all this stuff how they can fix all that. Somebody recommended to me to find answers there. When I fix all those problems, everything flowed naturally, nice for everybody else and myself.

I want to make sure I understood. There was competition or discrimination against—

There was discrimination from the management against certain people because of their age, because they were too old.

Oh, because of their age, okay.

And because they were a certain race or nationality. That's something that I don't like.

Got you. What kind of changes happened while you've been there?

Well, we stop all that. There was discrimination and we stop it.

Because there is a process if somebody feels that that they can go through?

Yes. Corporate came from wherever they are; I think it was Chicago—well, this is in Chicago. Somebody came really, really high and starting—because corporate always go there, but they were part of all the wrong things that they were doing, too, and they find a lot of people when they talk with all the employees. They think most people, too, from the management, and they clean the house and everything changed.

Is everyone that works at the airport a member of the union?

This is not the airport, my current airport. I work for a company. It's a small company. It probably has sixty employees that work inside the airport. They have five restaurants inside the airport.

Why do you think it's important for the union to be strong? Especially in Las Vegas the union is very important.

Because pretty much—what happened is one of those bad guys, the managers, he was a top dog, top person in the company I was talking all the struggles and things happen, he said, “Is this for me? I fire everybody.” He said it this way: “I bring a bunch of illegal Mexicans over here and pay minimum wage.” He was all about the money. It looked good for his benefit because if he shines and makes the company look good, he's going to get more promotion. He said it like that. Without the union the company will not pay us nice wages, the right wages. They make so much money and they just put it in their pocket.

The government right now with this pandemic give a lot of money to the companies to bail them out and keep the employees. My understanding is to keep the employees because I was doing this. They're keeping their employees. Someone is supposed to—I'm in C Gates. C Gates is Southwest, so I have contact with these people, Southwest Airlines, C Gates—so I have a lot

of connections with Southwest Airlines. The government gave right now money to Southwest and a lot of companies. Southwest is supposed to lay off a lot of people, a lot of employees. Because they receive the money, they keep the employees longer. They say we can keep now all my employees through this month. They're doing what they're supposed to do with the money. A company I know, Delta, they put their money in their pocket and everybody out, unemployment. A lot of big companies are not using the money for what they use. If we don't have the union, our hotels will be doing the same thing.

They're not unionized at—

Our union protects our jobs.

I'm trying to understand. Delta is not unionized; so, therefore, they can do that?

I don't know if they're union or not. Because a union, you have to keep it strong. If you don't have strong leaders or strong members, too, that know how to do their things, you're going to have a weak union. I don't know about them. But Southwest is half union, half not; you decide if you want or not. But Southwest is a good company. That's what I'm trying to say.

There are companies that no matter what happens, they worry about their employees. That's what I'm trying to say. Others, they don't care. They just want to put their money in their pocket even if they're receiving help to help their employees. That's why I'm trying to say is if you have a strong union that's support you'll have in a strong union; it protects our jobs and make the company, okay, wait, why are you saying that you don't have money to keep these employees here? You don't want to give them, I don't know, better medical or better wages? But you're receiving all this money and you just want to put it in the pocket or pay to somebody in a high position, but you want to get rid of the low employees, no? I think that's why you have to keep a strong union, to protect our jobs.

How do you actively try to promote and make sure everybody is a member of the union? Is that part of what you like to do?

I'm a shop steward and I end up now what they call a VO; it's a volunteer organizer. I'm pretty much close to the level of organizer. An organizer is the one who goes to the shop and patrol and change what's going on. Example, you have a problem. I can intervene like they do. The union trained me to do that inside my—they call it shop in my work. Not only my job, it is around the other companies that are unionized inside the airport. There is something I just go and communicate with other shop stewards and solve all the problems. If I hear they're doing some injustice to an employee, I deliver the message. If I don't know how to resolve this, I just go to somebody who can deliver the message and resolve them. That's how pretty much we work. And we help each other.

Why do you think some people don't believe in unions?

There's different factors. Like I said, I grew up in a union. I grew up in a union all my life; different unions back home. Some perception is that they protect lazy people. Like I said, every union is different. But you are there to protect responsible people, too. Let's say that the company did something wrong against this employee. Even though that employee is doing something wrong, but the company—this happened, too, in my job—the company don't help the employee. Let's say a company is going to fire for something wrongful on their side; it wasn't from the employee. Even if they say, "Oh, we find out how to get rid of you." I know the (company) wants to get rid of them. They get their job back because the company—they got fired the wrong way. And the union needs to help them because they're paying for it. They can go to court. We protect everybody still. We give chances, too. Some people see why this employee gets fired and the other one gets fired. They get caught doing something, I don't know,

attendance, let's say attendance, the employee that you don't like, and people see this. Maybe I have a problem with a new employee, but I feel the union don't help me enough, then I get fired or I don't get paid. I see on my job that I don't get paid and I get mad because I see that everybody gets paid, gets everything they want. I feel like that they don't help me. Then I just become mad at the union. Or, I lost my job, I never get it back; different kind of things like that.

[31:18] Or people want to ... They're just worried more about medical. They want more money, but they keep keeping money for the retirement, their benefit and whatever fee. Just different kind of things. It depends, each person. But that's what I notice, pretty much.

How have you personally grown? What have you learned from being a Culinary Union member? Has this changed you in any way as you've matured?

Oh yes. I was a very shy person. I talk a lot, but I wasn't a talkative person if I don't know you. I'm still like that. If I don't know you, I don't know how to approach. I'm very shy. If I see you don't have manners or if you're—how do you say that word? Like cocky or whatever. I'm shy. I don't believe too much in me. I believe that my English wasn't good enough even as I knew enough. I know I speak more English than a lot of people. But every time I'm looking for a job or doing something extra, "Oh, I cannot do it; I don't know English; my English is not good enough for a job."

When I joined the union, I started seeing how it works and they have people that don't speak English. They have leaders that don't even speak English and they're leaders in their hotels and they manage to keep the order and help other coworkers. I'm like, wait, what? Their education was pretty no education for most of them, for the older people, older leaders that just came straight here and didn't have education in their countries or even here. When I say no education, it's like they don't even finish high school. I'm like, they can do all this? Oh, I can do

it. I have some education. Wait, what? I still believe in me. The leaders remind me, hey, why you say you don't speak English? Why you say that you don't do this? I'm like, wait, you can do this. They just show me. When they were training me to become a shop steward, they show me a hard path and I was complaining, like, why? Why you guys are doing this to me? And they sat down with me and explained, hey, you know what? We believe in you. What you did right now, a lot of people don't do it. They could not do it. We have a lot of members that go through this path and they just fell here or they fell hard. Even though this person has been longer than you here for two years, you just did this in three months or six months. I started like, wait, what? I started believing in me. I started believing in me and got more confidence. It made me work.

I always like to learn cultures—like different people from different nationalities. I love to travel. I travel around twenty-nine or thirty-one countries. Meeting somebody from somewhere else, it's amazing. I started seeing that we have so many people from around the world in the hotels and knowing about them, I'm like, wait, this culture is this? You never know. I want to help more or understand more because there are so many people from different cultures, too. Everybody continues to ask me, why you say people that say union is important? How they grew up, too, just like Asians, Asians usually, they don't get together to fight back as a union do. Whatever the boss say is what they do. I'm like, no, no, no. I start trying to—it's cultural. You start meeting all the cultural people. I think it make me—I always want to be involved in not really charity or like that, but doing social things. I always want to do more like helping poor people, getting clothes, I don't know, sports, but I never have the chance to do it. Our union specifically is very active with social things. My first social activity was with MLK Parade. I didn't even know that we had that here in Vegas. I find out other during the parade, looking at all this, since it's going on, I discover other social things that are going on in the city, but nobody

knows. I start knowing how to get more involved in the community in different ways. It helped me in different ways around.

What did you do with the MLK? Did you participate?

Yes, it was a parade. We participate in the parade. My cousin was Obama, supposedly. We just walked all around. That's when I started to discover how we—I mean, what's going on around here socially. In the personal, like I say, personally grow with more confidence and all that.

I see that you got married in 2015, so you just got married a few years ago.

Yes.

Do you remember your anniversary?

What?

I was just kidding you. I was going to say, do you remember your anniversary? That's always a trick question to ask people. Did you meet your spouse here in Las Vegas?

Not really. I meet her in Taiwan.

That's the Asian connection that you've got.

Yes. I met her in Taiwan, but she's not Taiwanese; she's Filipina.

Where does she work?

It was just something weird that happened. I went to the Philippines with one plan, and one plan a hundred percent of the time went wrong. A friend from United States that is half Filipino end up helping me to turn over everything and make it a pleasant trip. I go with the family...[39:07] going around and then they say like, "Okay, we cannot do too much for you because, I mean, we have lives, too. You want to go to Taiwan?" I'm like, "Okay." "We're going to stay with her cousin." Went with a niece. I went over there and started talking to her, blah, blah, blah, and fell in love in Taiwan and now is my wife.

Do you have children?

Yes. [Speaking Spanish to child] *Yeshi, ven aca.*

That's cute. You have one, okay.

Yes, I have one daughter.

Excellent. Does your wife work outside the home?

She has a job. She works at one of the hotels in downtown.

I'm sure she's a member of the union as well.

No, she is not union. She is this person that don't like unions.

You're a mixed household in many ways.

Yes. It's not that she hates the union. She don't hate the union. It's like I tell to everybody, the union is not for everybody, either. It depends as a worker how you are, too, and how are your bosses at your work. She is a very good talker. For how I see she is at work and I heard she is very personable; that she had that talk, the big boss and managers, most of them love her. She is a great employee. She can get whatever she wants pretty much. Like, I need a day; she got it. Can you do this? I know you're not supposed to do that, but can you maybe come at this time, this day? She can get favors and all that. She do her job. She is an excellent worker and all that. I guess she gets recognized for her good job most of the time and all that, and that's why she can be moving all around different positions to the position she is. She don't have a high position or nothing, but she's been lucky. She's lucky that she has a company that for not being union that they recognize.

As parents how do you teach your child about both your cultures, especially you with the Puerto Rican culture? What does your little girl know about being Puerto Rican?

Well, I always tell her that she's Puerto Rican. The mom agrees she looks Puerto Rican. She looks Latina. She looks very Puerto Rican. We went to her house—she going to get mad when I say that—but we went to the Philippines and the first thing—*ven aqua*

Aw, beautiful. Hi. (speaking to his daughter)

Smile.

You have two beautiful women in your house.

It's not like she looks like me, but she looks like my family. The mom, her mom goes, "Oh my god, are you sure that's your kid? She doesn't look nothing like you." We say that she's Puerto Rican. ... But really, I'm not a hundred percent Puerto Rican. My dad is Jamaican. He grew up in Puerto Rico. Even though he don't have blood, he considers himself; I'm Puerto Rican, too. He says, "I'm Jamaican, but if somebody says I'm Puerto Rican;" he says yes. Same with me. I can say I'm a hundred percent Puerto Rican and all that, but if we have more conversation and go deep, I always say I'm Dominican. Even in the street, "You're Dominican?" I'm like, "Almost."

I feel proud of Dominican race, whatever. Baseball, they want baseball, yes. But the side that I root more is Puerto Rican, and that's what I'm doing with my daughter. One of the things, it comes with the political situation of the status. Like she asked me about (44:20), you come with dad because they oppress us so much to make us that we're inferior, and now I see the power that we have. Why do we have to feel inferior to the rest of the world and the United States? But it's something that comes from the government trying to make us like that, just proven. You can do research and you're going to see it that we're doing it with our people. Not only from the United States, it comes from the government of Puerto Rico, too, that it wants to be a state. (45:00) ... where the government at that time, the persecution of people who have

different beliefs and don't want—or they see, too, it was basketball in the '70s; we're a really great team. The proud of being Puerto Rican is raised so much that the government was—we feel fear that they're going to become independent or with the United States, and they started doing a lot of the same things to make us feel inferior. That's why I just root a lot: I don't want nobody to make me feel—because I'm Puerto Rican less.

Right. Absolutely.

I'm trying to teach her Spanish. She's four, so she's in that age that she don't want English. At the beginning she started watching *Peppa Pig* talk in Spanish, she started saying that she don't want a pig, that's why she don't speak Spanish. But she understands. Now I find out through the Disney application, through the TV, because that's how I learn English and improve my English, watching cable TV in English, I'm putting everything in Spanish for her. She watches cartoons and all her movies in Spanish, so she's learning the Spanish. She doesn't want to talk, but she understands it. At least I find a way.

That's good.

We're trying to—my wife speaks Mandarin. She's learning it. She teaches her basic stuff, like numbers. Since nobody here speaks that language, she can learn from my wife talking it. She understands only one to ten, but she doesn't know nothing more than that.

She'll pick it up as she gets older.

Yes. Here in this house my wife has the gift that she's dual languages. She speaks Mandarin, English, dialect from where she's from; ... and she understands a little bit of Spanish. She has heard different language in this house, my daughter, so that's why it's hard for her to keep up with the Spanish.

What about food? What flavors of food do you guys eat?

For me it's really hard to find food; for her it's really easy. But here we eat whatever. We like to experiment. She was a Chinese...she was a chef of a rich family in Taiwan. Actually, I didn't meet her in Taiwan. I met her in Hong Kong. She lived in Taiwan for six years. I met her in Hong Kong. She will get mad if I get that one wrong. She was in Hong Kong doing that. She did different jobs in Hong Kong and Taiwan. One of the last jobs that she learned was to be a cook and becoming kind of a chef type. She get that cook/chef job with this rich family in Hong Kong. Sometimes she had to go to China, back and forth. She specialized in Chinese food. Here, we eat a lot of Chinese food, Filipino. I don't like too much Filipino food, but she cooks a lot of Filipino food; that's what my daughter loves so far. She has a lot of influence—since she comes here to United States, now she has a lot of influence of Korean, Thai; all kinds of Asian food. She sees how they do it, and now she gets more motivated to do it because there's more, so much restaurants from those places, so much produce that she can find some. We eat pretty much Asian, pretty Asian more than Puerto Rican. She learned how to cook Puerto Rican, too.

That's good.

In order for us to get those ingredients. Yes, we eat pretty much all around Asia food.

Are there Puerto Rican festivals in Las Vegas that you go to?

There's one. I went there a few times. I personally don't like it. I don't feel really identify. I call it more...I don't know where you're from, but I don't know if you ever heard the term of Nuyorican. That's in New York.

Oh, New York Rican, okay.

Nuyorican. You don't necessarily have to be from New York, but that's pretty much where everybody—the biggest concentration of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. All around the East Coast to Northeast. It's like Nuyorican is someone who was born and raised in United States—in New

York, but we just use it as a term. No matter if you're from Chicago, we just call you Nuyorican if you're Puerto Rican. As a person from the island, we normally call you Nuyorican. I feel like, yes, everybody is proud of that, but you don't identify really. It's nothing bad to being a Nuyorican, don't get me wrong, because J Lo is Puerto Rican. Just like I don't identify, period. I don't feel like I identify as Puerto Rican. Like you say with a Mexican festival, you see it here and you feel you're Mexican, even though I'm not Mexican, but being around them I go, oh wow, I feel like I am Mexican. (52:32)

Do you identify as a Latino? If somebody asks you what your identity is, you just say I'm Puerto Rican? I mean, that's always a—

I say different things. I say that I'm Black; I'm Latino, but I'm Black. I identify as a Latino and I identify as a Black and I identify as a Puerto Rican. When I say Black; that's my color. I have friends—I even have one aunt, I don't know if she's still doing it, but she says that she is not Black; that her son is not Black; that her husband is not Black, and the rest of the family is like, dude, your husband and your son is the Blackest person in the country. I mean, I'm Black; that's my color.

Is that from your Dominican background, or is that from your Puerto Rican background?

Both sides... the Black part, it comes from Dominican because we're the darker in the family. My mom is a lighter one, so we can say that she's White. My grandma—we're mixed. If you see my family, we're mixed. I'm going to put it like that. This is how it goes. The males in the family, both sides, my grandpas from both sides, they're Black. My grandmas, they're White, are white in skin color. I have both. If I introduce you to family from the Dominican side, you're going to see people that are super black or super white, so it's like that. My dad is the darker one,

and my mom is the lighter one. It's like I told my wife, hey, don't get surprised if my kid comes out Black or White.

Let's change gears a little bit. We've gone through, boy, just a little less than a year of COVID-19. When the pandemic hit in March, how did your life change?

The pandemic, ah. ... I feel like—we're lucky that we're in—perhaps people complain about all the restrictions. I feel that we don't have that many restrictions. We don't have restrictions like New York or L.A. guys, putting the whole economy and the whole life for everybody to the trash, so I feel like—I mean, I don't feel like it's affected me really bad. Now I'm not working, but it's not even for the pandemic. It's because the airport is fixing a section of the gates that it's going to last for six [months] or one year or something like that, but I'm coming back soon to work. That's why I'm not working. In the beginning it affected me with my hours and they lay off everybody. Then right away everything started getting better. They called them right away, the whole company. I feel that's why I don't get a lot of change in situation really bad like a lot of people are suffering right now.

Something that I'm doing changed maybe the way that we used to behave going out. We used to go out to different outdoor places, like, I don't know—like whatever in summer, like go to a river, to the mountains, or going to L.A. to visit places. Now it's a big issue. We tried to do it to Laughlin. I'm like, this is bad. Like I say, there's more restrictions some places than others. Now we're just home all the time, making more time for holidays (57:43). I started learning how to—I've never been a handyman and I started learning. I'm not a handyman. I don't know nothing. I just started trying to be one. I'm fixing a few things, trying to learn. Other things that a regular man, this macho mentality, oh, you have to do this. I was raised by a woman. I never had

that example. I'm like, okay, I cannot pay all my life for everything; I need to learn how to do something else on the side.

Good for you. That's good. ...

I don't see what's a drastic change, what COVID did in my life. I mean, except for the mask. I don't complain. It is what it is; that's how I see it. It is what it is. Oh, I don't want to wear it. That's something they don't want, whatever. I'm not like that. I understand we need, people need it, so it is what it is. Just deal with it. Like I say, my life is being impacted. I will say it's impacted, but does this hurt me a little bit? But it's not something bad, but I cannot go and visit Philippines or Puerto Rico. I can go to Puerto Rico right now, no problems. It's just I'm afraid that it's...I guess I get COVID I don't know how many times, but I'm not showing symptoms, I guess. I'm not sure. Because I've been around so many people that be positive. I don't want to get home and bring it to my mom.

Did you say you had COVID, or didn't?

I suspect that we had COVID at the very first when my company shut down because me, my daughter and my wife, we kind of showed symptoms. The only symptom that really showed up is the breathing part. What I mean is I was working. I am high seniority. I started doing a job that I wasn't doing before, so I have to walk more, but I was exercising myself. I'm always lifting stuff because that's my job, really. This one I walk more and I lift less. I just get whatever I need to get to the storage and go back to the store, and I was tired. I started getting a load of everything, but I feel like I just run on a track like really fast. I wasn't joking. It's like I had a run from a far place to another, and I need air. I was like, oh my god. I was in shape. I cannot breathe and I feel like that for a few days. ... I'm sick with that, probably have all the symptoms that everybody

has. Everybody told me, you have it because that's the way you feel. You can feel worse, but they told me that's what you feel when you get sick.

You never went and got tested?

Never, never, because, like I said, I never showed a symptom that let me know that I was sick. I find out later that all my management and coworkers, my friends have COVID, and they never say nothing. I was in contact with all of them, so, okay, it makes sense now. We've been around so many people that have COVID that visit us or work with my wife—especially that work with my wife. A friend of my wife, they get tested by the job place, and we never showed symptoms. We have one that calls us constantly. Are we all right? Are we all right? Are we all right? We were like, why is he calling all the time asking us how we feel? He confessed that he had COVID. He was trying to make sure I'm okay. We probably had it. We didn't have nothing bad. That's why we're not afraid, either. But we changed our eating habit. My wife takes a lot of natural medicine, natural...

Homeopathic?

Not medicine. In a natural way you can be healthy and protect certain things, and that's what we're doing. Whatever kind of soup. We eat a lot of ginger and garlic; all those things that I believe in, too. I believe in a lot of natural medicine. I regret not learning it from my grandma. She died already and now I cannot get all the knowledge. But I see her when I was a kid how I have infection and my mom had one infection in the ears, and she just goes to the garden, grab this plant, I don't know which one it is. But I was a kid, so I don't know that. I wasn't interested. But she just goes to this plant in the yard, grab it, do some things, mash it, rub it, put some water, and then a few drops, boom. Faster than the medicine that the doctor gives us. There are certain things. That's something from my culture and I think everywhere, like even United States,

people who grew up around the animal field—doesn't have to be Latino, can be American—that have that experience those things in childhood that loves it, too. They've been using it. For those things, I would like to get her back.

Yes. I think that's really important.

That's what we're doing here.

That's really important.

That's what we're doing here to protect from COVID, in a way.

That's great. You will be successful because you want to do it. You're that kind of guy, I can tell. Any other stories that you want to share with me either about Puerto Rico or Las Vegas or your culinary experiences?

I'm going to tell you a big impact when I moved from Puerto Rico to here, in Vegas. I mention Vegas specifically, more like West Coast, but I know L.A. is no problem. L.A. people more had so much influence, same as San Francisco, but in Vegas. I have a lot of problem with—maybe it's my personality as a Puerto Rican, as a Caribbean. I hug a lot. I kiss a lot. When I say talk pretty or sweet, it's like I say a lot of...Hello, *mi amor*. Hey, what's up, beautiful? That's how we talk. I go to the grocery store in Puerto Rico. What you want, *mi amor*? Hey, *carino*? That's a word that usually you say to your kid or your wife or your girlfriend. In the Caribbean we use it to everybody. There's a way to say it and there's a way to say it. But it's things that we just always treat people with words like we're talking in—I don't mean that you guys don't have that. But to say *little woman*, we can say *mojasita*, in just one word. We can make it little, something tiny, so *minito* and *minita*. We talk too much in that way. A lot of people treat it bad, wrong way. ... I'm just saying people might take it like, ah, I think he likes me or he's trying to steal my girlfriend or whatever. I'm like, I just greet a person with a kiss. Everybody looking at

me. I miss that touch. That human touch that we have, I miss that. Every time that I go back home, I'm like, oh, this feels so good. I feel like people don't want to be that touchy. I experience a lot of jealousy from people. Their girlfriend or wife, oh my god, he's so sweet. They want me to be sweet because him. I miss that. But that was a shock. I don't see that in the East Coast, Florida, all that, people in Connecticut, everybody around that. Here people are more in their own world.

Another thing is with my skin color. It shocked me, too. "You're not Black." I'm like, wait, what? I'm not Black? What color I am? I'm not white. "You're Latino." Wait, wait, wait. One thing is raised. Another thing—so I see how everybody is afraid and there is a whole confusion when it comes ethnicity and the race and all those kind of things. I was like, you say that I'm not Black, but a girl who said that I was Black. I'm like, yes, I'm Latino, but I'm Black. In the East Coast ____, the first word that they're going to say, what's up, my nigger? It's like they treat me like I'm part of the culture. For me it was a shocking moment to adapt here. People don't see me as... Yes, I'm Latino, but I'm Black, too. I'm not black like super black, like Michael Jordan is super black, but I'm a lighter person. I've been treated like racism here, and not even as a Latino.

The racism that I experienced? It was as a Black person because I'm Black because of my skin color. I experienced that racism from Latinos and from non-Latino, like Asians, American, whatever, other cultures, because of skin color. It's like, why are they saying this and they're saying that? But I get discriminated because of my skin color, not even because... Yes, it's something that people don't talk a lot about it, those that hide it. But, yes, it happens to me a lot. That's why I identify too much with Black people and I support them a lot, the Afro American.

Yes. I got you.

The Afro Americans and I identify a lot and I understand. I understand the culture. I understand the history and I experience it. That's why I tell that story of that.

That's really important. You've hit on a really important topic that does come up every once in a while in this project. When you listen to music, do you like Afro Caribbean type sounds, or where is your music taste?

I listen to everything. I listen to everything, but my biggest influence always was—in my house, they never like it. Probably they still hate it. But they're into salsa. That's Puerto Rican music, merengue, salsa music that's from Dominican Republic, big in Puerto Rico. They're into very Latino music. Salsa merengue is the main one that they listen in here, but that's their main one. I was all into hip-hop, rock, not even the Spanish one. I was into the American one since we are super close to...the Puerto Rican culture is very attached to the New York culture because of immigration, so we had that strong influence. They hate it at home. They hate it. But, yes, I like rock. I like everything. As Puerto Rican music, reggaeton and hip-hop, no matter if it's English or Spanish. That's my main music. Unless it's cultural now. They don't want to consider it cultural because the lyrics and what they talk. You're singing that music, you're singing Puerto Rico. But that was my main, hip-hop influenced by United States and reggaeton.

Very cool. I want to thank you very much. This has been a great time. I appreciate you participating.

[Colloquy not transcribed]

I've enjoyed getting to know you, Gerry.

Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]

