

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH RODRIGO VAZQUEZ**

An Oral History Conducted by Nathalie Martinez & Barbara Tabach

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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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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  
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## PREFACE



Rodrigo Vazquez started with the Latinx Voices Oral History Project from its inception in 2018. He brought a keen gift for understanding the challenges that his narrators might share during an interview, as well a gift for moving seamlessly from English to Spanish and back again if need be.

Rodrigo candidly speaks of his personal challenges with depression especially during COVID-19 pandemic, his comfort in a bilingual world as a child of Mexicans, and his coming to understand personal identity.

Born in Michoacán, Mexico, his family immigrated when he was three years old and confronted significant financial struggles at first. Rodrigo became a U.S. citizen when he was thirteen. He is a 2019 graduate and is currently completing his master's degree.



*Above: A favorite photo as a first grader at Goldfarb Elementary School in Las Vegas.*

*Left: Rodrigo in 2018 during an oral history interview at the Oral History Research Center.*

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May 24, 2021

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Nathalie Martinez & Barbara Tabach

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Rodrigo Vazquez 05/24/21  
Signature of Narrator Date

Nathalie S. Martinez 5/24/21  
Signature of Interviewer Date

**Hello. The date is May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021. We are here in the Oral History Research Center at Lied Library at UNLV. My name is Nathalie Martinez and with me are...**

***Barbara Tabach.***

Rodrigo Vazquez.

**Rodrigo, could you spell your name for us, please?**

Yes. Rodrigo is R-O-D-R-I-G-O. Vazquez is V-A-Z-Q-U-E-Z.

**Awesome. Where are you from?**

I was born in Zamora, Michoacán, which is a city kind of close to the town where my parents are from...I don't know if they've changed it now. Before, you would get registered in the town your parents lived in—you needed to get registered after a week. Technically my birth certificate is from the town my parents were from, but I was born in Zamora, Michoacán.

I lived there until I was three years old, and then that's when my family immigrated to Los Angeles, California. We were there a few months, less than a year, and then we moved up north to the Bakersfield area in California, a really small town called Arvin.

**Do you have any memories from Zamora?**

No. The only memory I have of Mexico, and I don't know that it's natural memory or something that was implanted in my head just from listening to stories, though I vaguely remember...I'm really close with my older sister. She's three years older than me. We're probably the closest siblings. I was constantly playing with her. This one time she saw a black scorpion on the sidewalk in Mexico. She knew it wasn't dead, but she convinced me to touch its back. She is like, "I think it's dead. Touch the back." I got stung by a scorpion because of her. Again, I think I remember parts of that, but I don't know how much is implanted from just stories that I've heard.

**What was it that motivated your family to come to the States?**

That's interesting. My dad was born when his oldest sister was already in her early twenties, so my grandparents had my dad really late. He was the last one in the family. I think there were twelve siblings in his family, not all of them survived, though. He was the youngest one. His oldest sister at the time had already immigrated to the U.S. with her husband, so she was able to help my grandparents get a green card and, help everybody really, get documentation. Then obviously there was amnesty in the '80s where fieldworkers were essentially given residency. My dad had residency from a really young age, so he would spend half his time here in the U.S. while his parents worked out in the field and he would work out in the field, and then he would go back to Mexico to that small town where they're from. I've recently talked to my dad about it. When the protests were happening with Cesar Chavez and all that, my dad caught a bit of the end of that as he was probably a preteen. I think that's always why from a very young age he's had a strong sense of labor rights. It probably stems from that. My dad already had residency.

When he got married to my mom, they had my brother after a year of marriage in 1987, and then my dad decided he needed to make more money, so he came to work in the U.S. and left my mom in Mexico. My mom was like, "I don't like this," so then my dad brought her to Los Angeles. My older sister was born in Los Angeles in 1989. My dad didn't really like living here. He's never liked living here. He's always wanted to go back to Mexico. That's always been his dream.

### **Why?**

I think because he has a very romanticized notion of it that's when his family was all together. If I'm being honest, I think my dad was largely abandoned and neglected as a child. Sure, they provided for him, but emotionally he never received any support. I think he only finished middle school. He never went to high school. He went to high school for a little bit here in the U.S. in



Hollister, California, but over there in Mexico he didn't go back to school because his parents never encouraged him to do so. He always worked from a real young age. He started smoking cigarettes when he was eleven. He always had older friends. He always had professional friends, so a lot of doctors, engineers, lawyers, but he always hung around older people. I think when he was back in Mexico...I guess there's more freedom for a child. He never learned English when he was here. Over there he spoke the language, he knew people, the way of life was better, the food was better, he had more accessibility to fresh products, and he had friends over there where I think he was missing a lot of that socialization while he was here in the U.S. I'm sure all of that contributed to his distaste for the U.S.

When my mom came the first time, he was like, "I don't want to live here. I want to go back to Mexico." He sent my mom and my brother and my older sister first, so they were living over there. He was going back and forth. Then I was born in Mexico. My mom never really liked that, so she more or less told him, "Either we live together in Mexico or we live together in the U.S." Obviously he felt that he could make more money in the U.S., so we immigrated for the final time. Then my little sister was born in Bakersfield, California, which is unfortunate, in 1996, not that my sister was born, but that she was born in Bakersfield.

***I was like, is that a brotherly comment? All right.***

I tell her all the time. It was really weird. There was a lot of back and forth. The two boys were born in Mexico and the two girls were born in California. We always lived as a mixed-status family. It took my dad a while to actually become a U.S. citizen. My mom would pressure him into it. Eventually we all ended up getting residencies or citizenships, it just didn't happen until I was in middle school. I was in the eighth grade when I became a U.S. citizen.

**What was that process like?**

We've had other interviews where they've talked about it. My dad went to the organization NALA, and they had an immigration lawyer. He went to talk to them, and they helped him throughout the entire process from petitioning to...I think you have to pay fines and fees for crossing illegally. They helped out in all of this. I remember when I was probably in the sixth grade, when I was eleven or twelve, that's when we got our...not the green card. There is another card that you get.

### **TPS?**

I think so, yes. I'm not sure. They took our fingerprints at that time, and then they gave us some form of identification. At that point it signified that we were still in the process of getting everything else. We were legally able to stay there at the time. It took years. Immigration takes forever. A few years later that's finally when everything got approved. I was thirteen at the time. I was able to become a citizen. My brother, his birthday is November 28<sup>th</sup>, and I think the appointment for the citizenship and residency happened the first week of December, so he missed it by days and became a U.S. resident; he didn't become a citizen under my dad because he had just turned eighteen.

I remember when my dad was going through the citizenship process. I don't remember him studying much for the exam, though the exam was much, much easier. This was in the early 2000s. This was pretty close to post-9/11. I was nine, in fourth grade, when 9/11 happened. Things were much easier at the time. Things were barely starting to get stricter. I remember when I was in the fifth grade, I was with him at his ceremony when he became a citizen. I was there for that. Then in terms of details I remember getting fingerprints taken. I remember all of these medical exams. You need to get blood drawn. I remember all of that.

### **Why do you need to get blood drawn?**

I think they check for particular...like hepatitis or any types of diseases. We did all of that. I remember that they needed a bunch of pictures to prove our identities and I was short one. I think they only had a few documents of mine, but I was short one. For whatever reason I had my fifth-grade yearbook with me, and it was the one yearbook I ever bought. My dad asks and they were like, "Yes, this will work." He rips out the entire class, my class, and turns that in. That poor yearbook was more or less useless. That's somewhere I'm sure at the State Department or somebody has that. I don't know if they still keep those documents.

***Did you have any sense in grade school about what it meant to be a citizen or not a citizen?***

Yes. It's really interesting. I don't know if it's because our family was lucky in a sense that my dad was already a resident. I think we had a strong system because my mom's brother lived in Las Vegas, so he was here. His wife is a Cuban American, so she spoke English. She actually just retired. She used to work for the welfare office here in town. She knew the legal system and she was always able to help guide my parents as well.

Growing up we also never really heard a lot about deportations happening. That wasn't really a thing in Las Vegas for a while. I hear now that there was a time before my parents arrived where for a second it was pretty hot here if you were undocumented.

***Before the 1980s.***

Yes, or '90s because we got here in the '90s. But during that time we weren't really kind of scared of that stuff. It wasn't something that was at the forefront of my mind. To the point where there's novellas and my mom would watch novellas and everybody would watch novellas, and whenever there was a storyline about undocumented people coming to the U.S., they would get chased by ICE and immigration or whatever, this whole stereotype of *la migra*, and them running away was super prevalent on TV and in media, but it was an extremely foreign concept

to me and my family. At the time we were able to go into any state building or any consulate without fearing deportation because it used to be a lot more lax even as early as the '90s and early 2000s.

For us and for me, we always knew we were undocumented, but I never had that fear of family separation or any of that. Also, I think part of the reason for it was my dad's whole goal was always to move back to Mexico, so it wouldn't have really been detrimental to our entire family. My brother was six when he came here, so he had his childhood in Mexico. My older sister remembers Mexico as well. It wouldn't have been too harsh a transition for them, or for myself either, I don't think. But we never really had that fear. However, in the neighborhood that we grew up in, the apartment complex that we were living in—

**Which is where?**

It used to be called Marion Manor. It's off of Marion and Charleston. That's the first place we arrived to when we got to Las Vegas.

**And that was what year?**

1996. My sister had just been born and I turned five, so 1996 or 1997. I'll find out the exact year. But my sister wasn't one yet and I turned five here in Las Vegas. I know that much. There was a lot of mixed-status people, but everybody for the most part was from either really poverty stricken families to working class families. A lot of people would use their immigration status, or lack thereof, as a status thing. People would try to bully, be mean to me, and they would bring up the fact that I was undocumented, which I took no offense to, but that's definitely something that was brought up a lot. Kids don't really know what they're saying, so it's obviously words that their parents were saying at home and things their parents were saying. That prejudice did exist

within that community; undocumented versus documented was a thing. That's really what was more prevalent than us being afraid of any kind of immigration officer or even deportation.

***There was a sense of status if you were documented and looking down at undocumented people even though you might be from the same town in Mexico.***

Yes. It's really bizarre because the kids didn't even necessarily have command of the language despite the fact that they were born here. Apparently I learned to speak very early when I was a child...I don't know much about my family's last crossing when we stayed in the U.S., but I do know that we came by car. I have a cousin that I'm super close to. He lives in Las Vegas as well, and he was born the same year as me. He was born in February. My uncle used his birth certificate to pass me through the checkpoint. I was three at the time. He's like, "It will be totally fine. The immigration officer will ask questions and then we'll answer and it will be fine because he can't talk." He didn't realize that I could talk as well as I could, I think. My mom was like, "When he found out you could talk, he started to get really nervous," because they can ask him a question and this kid can essentially blow the entire story. I slept through the checkpoint, so it was fine. That's what I know from...

My older sister, she crossed legally because she was born in Los Angeles. When she crossed the border, she met up with my dad and he was a stranger to her because he had been living here. To her, despite the fact that my older sister was born here in the U.S., if anybody has a traumatic or actual border-crossing experience, it's her. She remembers all of things that she left behind. She is like, "I had just gotten a red tricycle. I loved that tricycle." They had to leave everything behind. I think it's affected her to this day because she holds zero material possessions. She's not into material things. Her room looks like a hotel room. It doesn't matter to

her. I'm like, oh, this is probably just some trauma from you having left all of your things behind, so now you don't want to get attached to anything.

That was my family's final crossing story. Super smooth. We never really had any of the issues that a lot of families, one, face now, or even faced back then. I think our family was always incredibly lucky for that reason.

I think language is always that has...not necessarily come naturally to me, but I've never had a hard time with it. I think it's something that I've always liked. I learned how to speak English before I went to school just by listening to my siblings and watching TV in English because my siblings were learning English at the time. Before kindergarten I was already speaking English. I always passed out of ELL classes, or ESL classes as they're known now. My command of language was always better than a lot of other kids, even kids that were born here, and part of that was very deliberate. But I just thought it was really funny that a lot of kids who didn't really have the grasp of English who were born here would try to talk down to me because of my immigration status. I was a bit more assimilated, I think, into culture here at the time. It wasn't ever anything that made me feel bad or that I was really ostracized for, but comments like that were definitely made.

**You mentioned earlier that your dad hadn't learned the language. Your parents, how has their language transitioned?**

They speak it now for the most part. They're much better at it than they give themselves credit for. When they lived in California, they always lived in predominantly Latinx spaces, first Los Angeles and then Central Valley in California, so I think it wasn't as much of an issue for my parents as it was, say, for my siblings. My older brother and my older sister, when they went to Los Angeles, their classes were in Spanish, as in they were in an English-speaking classroom

with a Spanish-speaking teacher. They were spoken to in Spanish, so they didn't learn English to elementary school here in the U.S. When they moved to the Central Valley, the same thing; they were taught to and spoken to in Spanish. But since there wasn't a separate class for them really, they were just educationally neglected for a really long time. The whole transition of events was extremely traumatizing for both my brother and my sister. They didn't really end up learning English or really anything formally until they got to Las Vegas, and by then they had exposure to the English language and they had more or less caught onto it, so they were able to keep up in English-speaking classes. I will say about my family, all of my siblings are really smart. They learn very quickly. They're very good at adapting to situations, possibly because we were constantly in survival mode, or it felt like. They had more of that issue with the language.

My parents just had that same issue of not knowing what certain documents meant or needing us to translate, which, I'm not going to lie, I was never in that role. I never translated for my parents; that was always what my older sister would do, or my older brother would do. Then when they moved to Las Vegas, they had my aunt who spoke English and who had grown up in Los Angeles, so she was constantly helping my parents out with paperwork. If they would get something in the mail, it would just go over to her house, and she would help translate everything and guide them through that. Language was never an issue for my parents.

My mom, as she eventually started working, she started to use it more. I think she made an effort to try to speak it.

Where did she work?

She would work cleaning houses when she was undocumented. The thing is, is that my dad really wanted her to be a stay-at-home mom. My dad was extremely...trying to be the definition of *machismo*; he didn't want my mom working. My older sister wasn't allowed to talk to guys,

just for the fact that she was a child in middle school. She had a school project one day, a group project—I didn't know this; she told me—"Yes, I got paired up with a guy, and he comes over to that apartment so that we can work on the school project, and Dad kicked him out." He didn't let him work on the project with her. He didn't want my mom to work. He wanted my mom to be a stay-at-home mom. The thing I love about the U.S. and machismo is that the U.S. is like, okay, I don't care what you think of gender norms; if you want to survive here, it's more than likely that both of you are going to have to work. There were times when mom would go clean houses, but, for the most part, she also wanted to stay home and take care of us. My little sister was just born; she's four years younger than me, so my mom was taking care of her. She would clean houses.

I remember the first job she ever got post-residency was at a McDonald's. Passing the Strip before the "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign, there is a McDonald's to the right-hand side. It's right next to a radio station. I don't know if it's still active or not. But she used to work there. I think she worked there for a couple of weeks, and then she was like, "I'm not doing this." If I'm being honest, she didn't have to.

My parents always struggled financially growing up, my dad struggled financially. He worked in construction. My uncle also worked in construction. They were involved in building a lot of Las Vegas because there was a huge boom in the '90s. I remember when I was in kindergarten—it's an elementary school called Goldfarb Elementary School. It's on Tree Line and Charleston. They were building houses around the elementary school known as The Orchards. Each particular subsection was named after a certain tree. I remember being in kindergarten on the lawn. It was during recess. Across the street my dad and my uncle were working on a house, so they could see me through the fence. My uncle came over and said hi to me, and then he told my dad, "Look, it's Rodrigo." Then my dad just waved hi. He didn't go up



and talk to me or anything like that. That's kind of how it was; they worked on this neighborhood. They worked on a bunch of neighborhoods in Summerlin. They worked on absolutely everything.

Eventually both of them ended up working in cement or concrete; they would do that and they did that for a while. Then finally both of them ended up getting their CDL driver's license, commercial driver's license, and became semi drivers, eventually each owning their own truck, like sole proprietors, their own businesses. In terms of careers, they've always moved up.

We've always moved up as a family. But at the beginning when they were working construction, my dad was making six hundred dollars a week. I think it was the '90s, so six hundred was a little more than it is now, but not much. We were barely making it. It was very much a paycheck-to-paycheck existence.

My dad was very not...I would say he was an absent father, as many Latinx's fathers are. He was there, he was always there in our lives, but he wasn't involved in our lives. I think his responsibilities were to go to work and make money, and then he didn't want to be involved with the kids at all. He was just kind of there, but the one that would take care of us was my mom. We all hated my dad growing up. I did not have a good relationship with my father growing up, I think for the same reason. He was stressed all the time. He wanted to provide for his family and probably felt like he wasn't do an adequate enough job for it. Kids grow up pretty fast, so we were constantly outgrowing our clothes. My brother is six-three, so he had a lot of growth spurts growing up. It seemed like that poor child was always in high-waters. I think for that reason my dad was always extremely stressed, and it wasn't like we could—he wasn't affectionate. My mom isn't particularly affectionate to begin with, either. Their parents were significantly less affectionate than my parents, so everything makes sense as to what they were. I know they were

doing the best that they could. With my dad, he was just kind of there, or he would be yelling at us, or he would take out his frustrations on us. He was never physically abusive, which is great, but he would get pretty loud. He can't control, even now, how much he drinks. It's not necessarily that he would drink every day, but he just couldn't control how much he would drink. Some weekends if he would get drunk, it would just be a mess. He's a pretty happy and affectionate drunk, which I find so irritating. It was this thing that he would be mean to you all week, and then he'd get drunk and want to be affectionate with you. It's kind of like, no, I would much prefer this behavior when you're sober. It was just that thing growing up; there was a lot of it. On weekends his friends would come over and my uncle would come over and they'd all get drunk. Then, of course, my mom was left to clean up and cater to people.

That was probably my life for the first ten years of it. Again, my dad said, "I'm not staying here. I don't want to stay here." He was super frustrated about that. My mom was probably fed up closer to the fifth grade, closer to when I was around ten, and she is the one that basically was like, "I don't care if you don't want to be with me. I don't care where you want to go. You basically owe me and my sons residency and you're going to get us residency." They are still together, obviously, but I think it was her way of forcing my dad to do something...not that he didn't want to do, but that he wouldn't otherwise have done, something that he continued to put off. That's who my mom has always been. She's always been the person that is more pragmatic, more realistic. My dad has always been idealistic, and she will immediately bring him down and be like, "No, this is what we're doing."

### **What was your school life like?**

I went to Goldfarb Elementary School for my first two years, so kindergarten and first grade, and that was fine. I knew the language. My friends from the apartment complex were also the friends

at that same school. I always did relatively well because I spoke the language and I made it a point to speak the language. I think there was this one time where I went to the library and I tried to check out a chapter book, and I got tested on, by the way. The librarian is like, “Read this page and if you get five words wrong, then you can’t check out the book,” or whatever. I did and obviously got five words wrong, so she didn’t let me check it out. However, I saw this White girl that was in my same grade, and I think she got a chapter book by the same author, and she didn’t get a test; she didn’t get quizzed on it or anything. That really pissed me off as a child, I think, so I made it a point to read as much as I could and read whatever it was I had access to, which my older siblings would bring books from their classes that they were assigned.

I always read things that were a few grade levels above me. Even if I didn’t understand them immediately, it was the one exposure to books that I had. Not that *Clifford the Big Red Dog* isn’t great, it just wasn’t doing it for me at the time. Also, at that time I already understood the importance of language, and the way I looked at it I saw language as an escape from poverty and as a way to help my parents out. I saw the power that knowing how to talk a particular way gave people. I never grew up speaking slang despite the fact that the neighborhoods I grew up in were pretty rough at the time, I’d say. I would never use any slang words; I would go out of my way not to. A lot of people did not like me in my neighborhood because they thought I was pompous or pretentious because I didn’t speak like them, and that was okay. I’ve never had being liked as one of my main motivators, anyway; I don’t really care. That was my life. I had my friends from school who were also the friends at home.

In the second and third grade, they rezoned us to Stanford Elementary School, which is across the street from Eldorado High School, a few miles from Goldfarb. I did second and third grade. In second grade I had an Italian teacher. She would teach the class in Italian. I had

completely forgotten about this until a few years ago. She would give the lesson in English, but every other sentence she would repeat it in Italian. I would come home and I spoke some Italian. A lot of my classmates started learning Italian, which obviously I didn't have her for fourth grade, so I completely forgot that. Whereas other students did have her for third grade and then fourth grade, and I'm pretty sure she made a few students, if not fluent in Italian, really close to it.

I always did okay in school. I always got As and Bs, probably because I was bored. It wasn't that I tried to get good grades. My parents never really valued that—that's not true. I think my parents tried to support our education as much as somebody that has never really gone through...a very different education system can, somebody who doesn't speak the language. They didn't know about our report cards. They didn't know when we got our report cards. My brother knew, so my brother would always sneak the report cards in from the mail. My older siblings would forge my mom's signature whenever there was fieldtrips and stuff.

### **Parent-teacher conferences?**

Those are interesting because I always served as a translator for my own parent-teacher conferences, and I also always served as a translator for my friends and all the Spanish-speaking kids in my classes, and I was eight. This is crazy to me now that I think about it. But I had a really strong command of both languages at the time. I can barely speak Spanish now—that's not true—but I'm extremely out of practice. Years back my mom was like, "I really want to learn English," and started speaking to me in English. We would only speak Spanish at home. When we started communicating with my parents in English, there went all our Spanish practice. I should really get back into that. At the time I was the class translator for every single class, probably from first grade up until fifth grade, I was the one translating for my friends. I knew if

one of my friends was failing and why they were failing those classes. I would have to tell my friend's mom, "Oh yes, he's not passing math." Those were always fun. I would do that for all of my classes.

I never lied. I will say this, I never lied. I never got in trouble, but I also never lied about anything regarding my education; neither did my siblings. If we were in trouble, we'd tell my mom. She would yell at us or whatever, but then it would be fine. We've always been really transparent. We've always been terrible liars. We're not going to lie, this is what I tell people. But probably because I can't shut up, so I just say everything. I could not keep track of my lies to save my life. I've always been very into dealing with the consequences of what I say. The whole forging of permission slips and things like that, that had less to do with my parents not giving us permission, which they would have, and more to do with the fact that we would always forget to have our parents sign stuff for us, so we would do it in class; I wouldn't. I never learned how to forge my mom's signature; my brother and my sister did, so they would sign all my papers. I would wake up my mom at midnight, and be like, "Hey, I need you to sign this permission slip for tomorrow." She got pissed. She is like, "Why are you waking me up? You could have told me this earlier. When did they give you this paper?" It's like two weeks ago.

All of this behavior, by the way, new development, all of my siblings—I think I was probably the last one—we were diagnosed with ADHD. I was just diagnosed with ADHD three weeks ago. It just explained a lot of our behaviors and a lot of the reasons why our transcripts probably looked the way that they do. My brother dropped out of high school and went to go get his GED despite the fact that he's probably the smartest person I've ever met. School wasn't for him, is what we used to think. I do think school isn't for everybody, but I think school isn't for everybody because they don't necessarily accommodate for everybody, and I think that that's

changing now. But we spoke Spanish, so there was that whole language barrier. What we were getting tested for was ESL. We never got tested for any kind of disruptions in our education. No one ever would have thought that any of us had ADHD. We're too brown for that. That just never registered in people's minds. They focused on other things. We never got accommodations that we probably should have gotten. We kind of went through school like that. It was a lot of forgetfulness that was going on. We would lose a lot of our paperwork, a lot of our homework, and then we would be too ashamed, I think, to either tell my parents or a teacher or whatever everything that was happening, so we would just take whatever grade we would get. But for the most part, I did well. I think I acclimated pretty well to it. I probably had better coping skills, which is ironic because I have the worst ADHD out of my siblings, but I did the best with it. Whereas my older brother and my older sister, they were made to feel stupid their entire life. Now they're like, "No, you just have ADHD." They were not accommodating. They were not giving you the resources you needed. That has a lot to do with the dynamics in my family as well in things that we deal with. Also psychology and psychiatry don't exist in Mexican households or people from small towns.

**We'll touch on that a little bit later if you're able. After Stanford where did you go to middle school?**

After Stanford I went to Snyder and I finished that up, fourth and fifth, so I went to three elementary schools. After that I went to middle school at Keller Middle School. It was the first time where I didn't know anybody that was going into middle school except for my cousin that I was really close to. He ended up going to Keller. But all my friends from the apartments ended up going to Harney Middle School. The reason that that happened is because my family moved when I was ten to another apartment complex, which was much nicer. My dad had already

started working in cement and concrete, so he was making more money. It was called Antigua Bay; it's something Cove now. It's on Charleston.

**What was it called?**

Antigua Bay is what it was called. It's on Charleston passing Nellis, literally a main street up, but completely a huge change. It's right in between Prince of Peace, the Roman Catholic Church, and Target. There's a Target on Nellis.

**Did you ever go to church growing up?**

Yes. Yes, yes. You'd understand that in these small towns, the towns are built around a Catholic Church. That's just the way of life. We were all confirmed before we were baptized. You used to go and take your baby to a mass, and they would confirm them as members of the Catholic Church as babies. They looked at the first communion as, well, now they're old enough to actually learn what this means. Confirmations used to happen when you were really young; it happened after your baptism. You could get confirmed; it was this huge ceremony where they would confirm all of the children who didn't know what was happening, and then when you got older you did your first communion. We had been confirmed and everything in Mexico. They would go to church every Sunday; that's just the thing that they would do. Also, there aren't a lot of social things that happen in small towns, so I guess that was also their entertainment.

They come to the U.S. My mom tries church, but it's obviously very different to the church back home because back there everybody knew everybody; everybody knew the priest. She comes over here where Las Vegas, sure, wasn't as big as it is now, but it's so much, much bigger than the town that they came from. It was like a city; there was many more people. It was a lot more impersonal for her. The sermons were a lot more...Coming from actual biblical texts or other texts, something that the priest probably thought above or worked on ahead of time, so

she already didn't like that, but she continued to go, like the good Catholic that she was. She continued to go to mass.

### **Where?**

At Prince of Peace. But my older brother, he would get bored at church and he would pull my little sister's hair and he would make her cry, or he would bug my older sister, or he would bug me, so we were constantly laughing or crying, and I think my mom was no longer able to bear the humiliation of everybody staring at her and her terrible children, so we just kind of stopped going. I didn't end up doing my first communion or my confirmation until I was seventeen, and I had to go to Mexico to do that.

### **Why?**

I would also start my first communion classes, but then I would just never go. I later found out that they were not cheap. She should have put me in soccer or something with that money. No. I wouldn't go to class. It was every Tuesday or Thursday. I wouldn't go. My dad, he's the only one that drove at the time, so he came back from work, he was tired, I had class. If I'm like, "I don't want to go," I think he would just be like, "Okay. I really don't want to take you." So, it was pretty easy. My brother and my older sister did end up doing their first communion. I actually started my first communion when we moved to Antigua Bay, so I could walk to the church, and I was expected to walk to the church. At that time my mom had gotten a job cleaning apartments. When there is the whole turnover, when a tenant leaves and they're getting it ready for...that's what my mom did. She would clean the empty units and get them ready for a new person to come in. She was doing that and she comes home one day and she's like, "Hey, I put you in catechism classes. You need to walk there on Tuesdays and on Thursdays." I did not walk



to catechism on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so I didn't go. I did not do my first communion that time, either.

It became this thing where it was a huge part of my parents' upbringing and their lives, in particular my mom who spent her entire life in that town, but then she felt alienated, I think, from the church because the church no longer offered her the sense of community that she had back home. Then to top that all off, her children were misbehaving. She started to get further and further away from it, and she stopped going to church. After that we never really grew up going to church. My mom still does it. Whenever she goes back home, she will go to church every Sunday. She is there. When she is in Las Vegas, she will not go to church to save her life. I think it's a cultural thing for her more so than a religious thing for her, and that's how it ended up being for my family. We were never brought up religiously Catholic, but we were brought up extremely culturally Catholic. Whatever stigmas the church carried; that was still what was expected of us.

**And celebration-wise, what was that like in your household?**

We would celebrate Christmas in the traditional way. My mom makes tamales. She makes really good tamales. She makes pozole for...the 24<sup>th</sup> is obviously when it's celebrated. For Christmas Eve, she's make pozole and she'll make tamales. I hate pozole. I do not like it.

**Is that the stomach?**

No, that's menudo, which I love. But the thing about menudo is I only like it if the pieces are cut really small. If they're really big, I won't eat it. Pozole is beef, but I don't know what part of the actual cow it is. I'll ask my mom. But it's similar. It's also a stew. It's super popular. Everybody loves pozole. I can't stand it. She would make pozole.

My mom is a really good cook, really good. I can't go to Mexican restaurants because my mom makes better food. And this isn't some bias, like, oh, Mother's cooking is always best, no. Objectively my mom makes insanely good food, and so does my dad, surprisingly. He's a really good as well. Yes, growing up we would eat that, *menudos*. I will say that our diet was strictly Mexican food, traditionally Mexican food. We are also from Michoacán, which is known for a very particular cuisine and that's what we would eat; that's what we grew up eating.

My mom would shop at Los Compadres, which was one of the first Mexican stores in town. She would walk there and I would walk with her. This was on Lamb, probably a twenty-, thirty-minute walk. That's all we would eat. My grandmother wouldn't cook a lot of meat, apparently, so a majority of my mom's dishes are pretty vegetarian. My dad did not grow up like that; he really likes meat. My mom would do a mix of both. She would try to cook meat when she could. I guess my favorite thing that my mom makes is this thing called (*espinazo*); it's also know as *mole de olla*. It's the backbone and it's pork. You make it in a really thick *mole*, like a red sauce. Have you guys ever seen it? *Mole* is sort of like a curry in texture, so it's thick. You make chicken. *Mole* is made with turkey.

***It's like a gravy?***

Yes, it's that consistency, right. It's very thick. *Mole de olla* is a bit thinner than that, so it's like a stew, and then you have Mexican squash, which I don't like; (*chiotte*), which I also don't like. You like *chiotte*; I'm not a huge fan of it. Potato, carrots, corn. It's just this stew. It's made with *molesketa*. *Molesketa* is a dish that's specific to Michoacán. It's extremely—like, you think European in construction. At least the way my mom makes it, it's the one rice my mom makes with butter as opposed to oil. It's a mix of onion and garlic. In traditional *molesketa* you add beans and beef and other things to it, and then there's a chile that tops it. But in the town my

mom is from, instead of adding all the extra stuff to the rice, you add the *mole de olla* to the rice, so it's very buttery and garlicky rice. That's my favorite thing in the world. I tell her all the time, "If I could only have one thing to eat the rest of my life, it would be *espinazo* or *mole de olla*." She would make that a lot.

Then there's enchiladas. She makes them all the time. Enchiladas are fine. I prefer the green ones to the red ones, much less greasy. But enchiladas, the way she makes it, is a Michoacán way to make it as well. It's street food over there, so you would see ladies selling enchiladas at night on every corner. They're tiny.

**How often would you go back with your family?**

I have only been there once. I hate it. I hate the town that my parents are from. I'm like, "I'm not going back there." It's sad. My parents really want to be buried there. I don't want to go back there. I've been there once. It was fine, the experience was fine. I went when I was seventeen because I was going to do my first communion and my confirmation. It takes four years approximately, because now catechism classes are two years and confirmation classes are two years, and it's the same over there in Mexico. My cousin on my dad's side, his dad, who is not related to my dad obviously; his mom is my dad's sister, so my uncle essentially, his brother is a priest, he got us all in. They're like, "You guys have two weeks to learn all these prayers, and then we will do your first communion and your confirmation." I went to Mexico just for that, so that was fun.

Interestingly, religion always played a very secular part of our lives as a cultural part in our lives. I love rosaries and I have a bunch of rosaries.

***You like the physical rosary.***

I like praying.

*You like saying the rosary.*

Yes, yes. I really enjoy it as a meditation. I know it. I haven't done it in a few years. I probably have to look it up. It's something that I enjoy, but I have zero religious connotation when I'm doing it. I think it's probably meditative for me. I don't know. I'm not really a prayer type of person. In fact, whenever my mom is like, "Oh, if it's God will..." There are a bunch of common ways to say that in Spanish. Whenever she says things like that I get really annoyed. Then I say comments like, "God isn't real." I'm not an atheist. My mother swears I am, which is horrible. Because she gets scandalized by it. She's like, "How could you say that? It's my fault because I didn't take you guys to church." Whatever.

*It's a heavy guilt trip.*

Yes, for sure.

**Catholic guilt.**

Yes. I tell her that all the time. "God isn't real." I think mostly because it's annoying because it will be like, "Oh, can we do this tomorrow?" And it's, like, if we wake up tomorrow; if God wills it. I'm like, "It's yes or no. Can you not... Could you answer, please? I don't think I'm going to die, I don't think we're all going to die; we could, but..." That's kind of the role that religion played into it.

Catholicism is extremely engrained in Mexican culture. I think in machismo it very much plays a role. In small-town mentalities. The town my parents are from had a very Victorian mentality, or at least did, about things. My grandmother was a widow. She was beautiful. My mom's mom was beautiful. She was a widow. After that everybody wanted to look at her as a good time because she was no longer a virgin because she had been married and she was young. Nobody wanted to take her seriously, or so my mom says. She would get harassed a lot. She

ended up marrying my grandfather, my mom's dad, and that's when she had all of her kids. But that's the way the town was: A lot of gossip. It's a small town.

*I'm curious. I love the stories you're telling. When you were doing the oral histories for this project, what did you feel when people would talk about their own personal growth experiences?*

The biggest thing that I got out of this is everybody's experience is so different, but even then, out of all of these oral histories, everybody's experience is vastly different to my family's and my family's upbringing. For a really long time, because my parents didn't listen to banda or any traditional or regional Mexican music, I always felt a bit left out by Mexican Americans or Mexican students that would come and immigrate over. I felt like we didn't relate. I think my connection to my heritage or my roots were really in the food and in our upbringing in terms of our morals and ethics that were instilled in us. When I would listen to a lot of oral histories, I was, everybody is so vastly different to the experience that I had. It kind of allowed me to, one, understand where a lot of my friends, when I was doing them, in terms of how they identified with the culture. What I guess I already know is that there are multiple points of view that are valid that are vastly different from the stereotypes that are presented. It's really interesting to me because a lot of the interviews that we got also, in particular of the Mexican American individuals or individuals close to my age, I think so much of their interview focused on otherness, and there was obviously othering that happened in terms of discrimination and fears of deportation and everything like that, but I guess I never really...while I accept this and acknowledge this, I think that that's a very narrow way to look at a person's existence or identity. It's not even necessarily a celebration. It's just that I think my experiences seemed really western when I would talk to other people despite the experience that happened to my

parents a lot of the times. They just seem like really whitewashed experiences. But now, after hearing all of this other interviews—granted, they’re not just Mexicans; they are people from everywhere—I just realized that it’s just another narrative that we’ve been expected to tell, this narrative of oppression and/or success. I identified a lot more with people closer to my parents’ age. Whenever they would tell stories of their town, or whenever they would speak about their culture; that resonated more with me because I think that’s kind of how I felt about my culture at the time. I didn’t feel othered. Again, the biggest reason for this is, one, my father never let us identify as anything but Mexican. He’s like, “You’re Mexican. You’re not Mexican American. You are Mexican.” There was always this whole notion of us going back and my father resenting the U.S. Growing up we saw all of this, so it became this very weird place where I can’t say that my family’s conflict was trying to find a place in American culture, trying to assimilate, because it was something that was constantly being rejected by my dad.

**Yet, you have this awareness of where your dad was coming from. How has your identity changed in any way, or do you still hold onto that Michoacán identity that was given to you?**

I still say that I’m Mexican. I think part of that reason is just because I’ve been saying it so long, so I feel comfortable saying it. My sister now says that she’s Mexican American to my dad, I think partly to piss him off. Also, because she’s like, “I am. I grew up here.” With my dad I don’t...I view my identity and I view my heritage not as a tie to any one particular place that I lived in or was born in, but I view it in terms of my parents. To me, my identity or my heritage or my culture, it only extends to my parents. I detest the majority of my extended family. That’s another thing: We did not grow up close to our family. My father is estranged from all of his siblings save for one. All of my mom’s siblings live in different states. She has one that still lives

in Mexico. I didn't have that kind of upbringing where we were super close to my dad's family, so I can't say my heritage is these big parties and being surrounded by a bunch of family and this community that cared for me. My identity and my heritage stems from my parents. To me, in a way I view saying I'm only Mexican as a way to respect my parents. It's a nod back at them. That's why I don't view my line as this ever-extending thing. It's just my parents and my siblings and that's who I am extremely close and overprotective of.

***Do your parents still talk about going back to Mexico other than to be buried there?***

Yes, my dad does. He still really wants to go back. He's always wanted to go back, and he's always wanted us to go back.

***He would take the whole family back.***

Yes, that is his dream.

***Why has he never pushed that?***

I think because a lot of things get—despite the fact that my dad has historically started to make more money, and my mom started to make more money, he's always had this mentality of “I don't have enough money.” He's always felt financially insecure. Also he feels like he still needs to take care of us, which three out of his four children still live at home with them. But, at the same time, I'm like, “Dude, if you guys really wanted to leave, it's not like we would be completely destitute; we can survive.” Part of me just feels like he doesn't really do it because I think he puts too many obstacles; he gets in his way too much, thinks too much. He is a very what-if thinker. My mom really wants to go back for a while, but my mom straight up told me, “I can no longer live in Mexico full time. I think I can go between the two places, but I just can't live in Mexico full time.” There is this whole notion of—I think my dad has believed in this idea of what Mexico is and this way of life for so long that were he to not do it, then he would be

admitting to himself everything that he thought wasn't necessarily real because it's an extremely romanticized notion of it.

***That idea of can you go back home again, really?***

Exactly, yes. To have this house and have this town. I try to tell him, "Dude, life did not stop when you left. Life did not stop over there. Everything is constantly changing." He doesn't get that. He still romanticizes this era that Mexico is still super small towny; everybody knowing everybody; everybody being friendly; just this place that no longer exists. But he refuses to acknowledge or see that.

***When you first applied to work on this project, that was two and a half, almost three years ago now, what appealed to you? Why did you want to interview for a position with the group?***

The semester before, the fall of 2017, I had broken my foot that summer, so I was in a wheelchair. Essentially I might have needed surgery for it. I didn't want surgery. The cast was getting looser, obviously, as your foot stops swelling, as the swelling goes down, so any little thing could have made my foot worse. I'm like, "I can't do crutches. I can't do the scooter," because my foot keeps hitting up against the cast, so I was in a wheelchair. I ended up taking an English class with Jessica Teague, who is a professor here.

***With whom?***

Jessica Teague. She's a professor in the English department. It was a jazz and literature class. We read a lot of biographies and a lot of jazz stories. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote a lot about jazz. He had a few jazz novels. At the end she is like, "You guys can do a project where you guys can either do one on a jazz novel or on a jazz musician, either the music or a piece of literature or anything, movie, whatever." She is like, "You guys can do an oral history if you guys want to interview people." Claytee went and talked to our class. At the time she came and brought us to



Special Collections because jazz was really big. A lot of prominent jazz artists played here in Las Vegas, and it was still segregated. It was a very strange time and era in Las Vegas, which I think Las Vegas is perceived as a very ahistorical place in the sense that a casino could be up for decades and have so much history and it could be just completely demolished one day and something new will be built on top of it. When I went to Special Collections, I did my research paper on jazz musicians in Las Vegas and the segregation and racism that happened in Las Vegas. I went into the archives and I read a lot of interviews from the African American Experience. I was just completely immersed in that for an entire semester. I ended up writing a terrible research paper on it. That really got me going in terms of oral histories.

That same semester I took a Latino/Latina literature class. It was taught by José Orduña, who was a new professor here. He's an MFA. He specifically focused on testimonials, which is similar to a biography, but it's a lot more politicized and it's explicitly Latin American. It's something that grew out of Latin America. Essentially oral histories is what I was reading, or people's histories. I just became obsessed with that; with people taking over their own narrative, kind of, because there is also the voice of the editors and publishers that go into play into crafting particular narratives. But, for the most part, it's more reclamation than, say, a journalist going somewhere and then speaking for others. I just thought that was pretty powerful. Also, it was just normal people who I find way more interesting than anybody that has any kind of popularity or recognition. I just think everybody lives extremely vast and complicated lives and you can just learn from them.

When I saw that this job was posted, I jumped on it immediately. If I'm being honest, it didn't even have to be centered on the Latinx community. I just really wanted to work with people on oral histories at the time. It just so happened that it collided with what I wanted and

with that community as well, which I have been pretty critical over the past of my own community. That's because I'm an optimist, though, I swear. I'm like, "I need to apply for that. I don't care if I get paid for it. I just want to help out or learn more and talk to people." That was my biggest motivation, is that I had access to the archives and to the previous project. I also saw it as the only place that was interested in keeping a history of Las Vegas that extended beyond Las Vegas Boulevard.

**When you joined the project initially, what was the first interview that you did or watched?**

The first interview that I watched was Liliam Lujan Hickey. That was the very first interview. She happened to live in a house maybe twenty minutes from my house that I currently live in.

*It wasn't even that far, I don't think.*

Yes, right. I would always walk by and I just really liked her backyard. I used to run, believe it or not. Whenever I would go running, I would see the back of the house, and I was like, "This house is so nice. I love this house." Never in my life did I think I would ever walk into that house, and that's who we ended up interviewing. Also, the elementary school that is across the street from my house is named after her; it's Hickey Elementary School. Suddenly I put a face to a name. Yes, I think it was interesting.

I think what I'll say about this project is that I've listened to a lot of individuals that have various stories and opinions that differ from what I think, and I've been able to kind of separate my feelings from a lot of things and just take everything in instead of contesting things and being like, "Well, I don't agree with what this person is saying," just being like, "Okay, this person's experience is also valid." I think that's one way that the project has really helped me grow as a person and just grow up. I think it's really helped me mature in that sense. Before I would be more reluctant to listen to super distinct perspectives. It's not like I want to live in an echo

chamber, either. But now I'm more like, obviously these individuals' thoughts are made up of their experiences, and while I don't agree with what they're saying or where they're coming from, I do understand why they're saying. That's probably the biggest thing that I learned from this project.

I also want to say that working on this project, it happened at probably the hardest point in my life. For a very long time I just felt like everything I was doing in all aspects of my life was just failing. I'm failing at the project. I'm failing at school. I'm failing at absolutely everything. It was never something I look back at and I can be proud of the work that I was doing, which sucked because unfortunately something I really wanted to do ended up clashing with my mental health. I think that now that I look back at it and that I'm in a significantly better place, I'm able to appreciate not just the work that I did, but the work that everybody that worked on the project did, all of our narrators a lot more. Editing these oral histories, even now I have a distinct view of it. It's almost like reading a novel except that I've actually met these people. I'm taking absolutely everything in now. I don't know. I'm pretty proud of the work that I've done. It's taken me a really long time to be able to feel that way. But, yes, I'm really happy with what we were able to accomplish with this project even if it seems like super surface because you can never really get an entire community or history from a few interviews. It's much, much more than existed before.

*Oftentimes when I'm doing the editing process—you both can relate to this—I think about what more I would like to ask that person, how valuable it would be if I could sit down and talk to that person again if we had the time and manpower to do it because you do look at it as times goes on and you listen to more stories, you want to go back and dig out more details about that person.*

*Continue talking about your major and your educational experience at UNLV.*

Middle school was the hardest point in my life, I think.

**Where did you go again?**

I went to Keller Middle School. I had no friends. The only person I knew was my cousin, and I, more or less, started hanging out with him and his friends. It was probably a bit more than bullying, but I was getting kind of bullied by adults in my life at the time.

**At school?**

No, at home. I kind of lashed out at my peers. I've always had an infinity for talking, again because of language. I also think it's fun. It's fun to shoot the shit with people or whatever. But I was the first one in my family to rebel at eleven or twelve. I started talking back to my parents. I started saying bad words. You could not say a bad word in my house before then. I started to say bad words.

**How did that go into high school?**

In high school, at that point I had friends.

**Where did you go?**

I went to Las Vegas High School my freshman and sophomore years. That's also when the recession hit, so it hit my family pretty hard. We were about to lose the house that my parents had just bought. My mom was constantly on the phone with banks. We had moved from Antigua Bay to a house that we were renting across the street from where my uncle lives on Sloan, and then we moved into the current house that we live in, which is off of Carey and Hollywood; that was in 2007. The recession hit. My mom ended up working, doing the same thing, cleaning apartments at Antigua Bay. After high school I would walk to Antigua Bay, and when my mom was done, she would take us home, my sophomore year. I would just listen to my mom on the

phone with the banks pretty much begging for them to work something out with loans. It was a really difficult situation for my family. My sister had finished school in 2007, and they couldn't pay for college; she couldn't go to school. Nobody was hiring anybody. She went to a Macy's interview with people that had their master's degree for an entry level sales associate. The recession was rough. But I was the one that was listening to my mom try to deal with all of these people.

All I did my sophomore year was sleep; that's really when I had the largest episode of what I now know is clinical depression. That was one of the times that I probably first experienced it as a teenager. I went from having really good grades my freshman year—and I did really well on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in middle school. A counselor my freshman year called me into his office and was like, "Hey, there are a lot of people looking at you, so you need to do well in classes." I go, "That's great." But then I failed everything my sophomore year because I was super depressed. I just slept through my sophomore year.

My junior year I ended up transferring to Eldorado High School because they had block schedules. I didn't actually fail. I got all my credits, but I didn't get good grades. At Eldorado I was like, I can boost up my GPA; I can retake some classes, even, and my senior year I could either cruise or take other classes and get ready for college.

### **College was always in—**

Yes, for me it was. It was always something that I was going to do. My dad always wanted us to go to school because my dad was like, "I wish somebody would have told me to stay in school. I really wish I had that." He always pushed that. That's how my parents supported us because they didn't really know how to support us as students. My mom constantly prioritized household

chores or other things to our education because she didn't view school as anything that was exhausting at all.

My senior year I got hit with another depressive episode, so I did horrible. I think that's the first year I failed anything. The only class I passed was my English class. I actually missed definitely more than 50 percent of the school year; I wouldn't go to class. I would only go to my English class, and I got a D in English.

**What kept you going to English specifically?**

It's the only class I needed to graduate. I just needed a D. I ended up getting a three-point-oh unweighted, three-point-four something weighted, or something like that. My GPA wasn't terrible, but it wasn't great. I had set myself up well enough to where apparently I could fail myself one year and I'd be fine. I ended up taking the AP exam for English because it was an AP English class, and I was the only one in class that passed it. It's kind of bolstering because whenever I would do practice tests, I think because I was never in class, the teacher would mark it super low. It was like a one out of five. Yet, I was the only one that passed the exam. But whatever.

I wanted to go to UNR, but for whatever reason I just thought it wasn't an option for me. My mom also didn't want me to go to UNR. I'm like, okay, whatever. I started at CSN. Then suddenly I had a bunch of free time.

**What year was this?**

This was in 2010. I just turned twenty-nine last Sunday. Christ, I'm old. In 2010 I started at CSN. I didn't know anything about financial aid. I didn't fill out financial aid. Who was going to teach me about that? I had to get a job. I was working. I had to pay for my classes. Suddenly my time opened up. Because I have ADHD and I didn't have a strict schedule, I couldn't really do

time management, so school was really stressful. I would stay up all night. I have never in my life written anything other than a first draft. I've never edited anything because I would always write it the night before, maybe hours before it was due. I've always gotten pretty good grades on essays, but I would feel that because I'm like, damn, imagine if I actually tried, I probably would have had something decent. For that reason, my school was very hit-or-miss in terms of my grades. At the same time, there were a lot of things that were happening within my family that were coming to light, so that was a really stressful time. I was depressed for a lot of college at the time.

Then I ended up finishing in 2014, finally. I started to just go part-time, certain semesters. I ended up finishing school with my associate's in political science. When I was younger the one thing I always wanted was to be a lawyer, I think because you never see depictions of poor lawyers on TV, and I did not want to be poor. I always wanted to be lawyer, and so I'm like, okay, I still want to be a lawyer. I did poli sci as an associate's, and I thought I was going to do political science for my undergrad and then try to apply to grad school. By then I was really interested in journalism or writing more, so I was unsure of what I wanted. I had also taken a macroeconomics class that was required for the political science degree, which I really ended up enjoying.

I applied to a school in New York City called The New School. It's not new. It's always been a very progressive school. They were known for being the first institution in the U.S. to create a program of asylums for Jewish academics that were fleeing the Holocaust. Hannah Arendt taught there. A lot of actors would go there. Now, The New School is most known for their design school, which is Parsons, The New School of Design, which has produced...Vera Wang went to The New School. I think Tom Ford went there; Zac Posen; a lot of designers went

to The New School, and that's what it's known for. It's a really good design school. There's a desk called the Parsons Desk; it's named after the school. I got into there, a journalism and design program, a joint program between their liberal arts campus and Parsons, the School of Design. It was really to teach students the landscape of digital media, which is where everything was headed and where everything is now and how to essentially create your own content. The thing about that school is that it is really good internships. A lot of students will go and intern for League of Nations, *The New York Times*, or just really prominent places. It's a really well-connected institution.

It's extremely expensive. They gave me enough money to cover tuition, which is like fifty grand, but if I wanted to cover housing, I would have needed to take out student loans. Housing in Manhattan isn't cheap, and it was like fifteen thousand dollars a year for housing there. I thought about it and I'm like, okay, I have at least two to three years left, so I'm looking at a minimum of forty-five thousand to sixty thousand dollars of student loan debt for undergrad to become a writer in New York City, get real, dude. I deferred for a year. They offered me more money. It still wasn't enough. At that time I was also thinking of applying for their economics program, which is an economy degree for undergrad and it had an immediate bridge for an MA in econ as well.

I took two years off school, a year and a half off of school while I was trying to weigh if I would go to The New School or not. I ultimately decided against going to The New School, and I enrolled at UNLV as an econ major originally as a BSBA, Bachelor of Science and Business Administration, with an emphasis in economics. I hated accounting. It's not that I could do accounting. I was fine at accounting. I did fail the first exam. I was extremely depressed. I called my sister and said, "I don't want to do this. This class is super depressing. I can't do this."



So, 2016 was a really rough year for me. That was the year Trump got elected. The same week, my dog that I got in middle school had just died. My first dog died, Trump got elected, at this time I had just gotten hired at Container Park working as a greeter at Container Park, so I kept on seeing a bunch of racist people coming in, and I had to say hi to them. They were all Trump supporters and it was extremely taxing. I broke down at work because my dog had just died, super embarrassing. I would totally do it again. It was a difficult year. An accounting class? No, I wasn't about to sit through an accounting class. I audited all of the classes I did need for the BSBA. I switched from the BSB to the BA, which opened up a bunch of other electives. The following week I went and declared an English major and then I started English coursework the following semester. From spring of 2016 until I graduated, I was taking eighteen credits a semester and I was working between twenty to forty hours a week. I was working weekends at Container Park, and then I had a job here at school where I would work twenty hours in between classes. How I managed that I have no idea. I think it's better when I stack my schedule. But it was insane. I was taking eighteen credits and working full-time essentially, which is extremely taxing.

I finished my undergrad. At that time I'm like, well, maybe I'll try law school again, whatever. It's always in the back of my mind. I was going to take a gap year and I was going to study for my LSAT, but one of my former professors in the econ department was like, "Hey, if you apply for the master's program, I can get you funding starting in the fall." It reminded me of a one-eight-hundred ad, like, "Call now and get it for like...If you call within the next twenty minutes..."

I apply. I get it. I start the econ program, which I really probably shouldn't have. What happened is that...This was in 2019. I finished my undergrad in 2019. Through the whole thing,

from 2016 to 2019, I was oscillating in terms of, well, I was clinically depressed. I was, for the most part, functioning. But spring of 2019 before I graduated, my last semester in undergrad, it became more difficult. I started becoming less functioning and I probably should have noticed the signs. I will say I had started therapy at that point. I probably started to notice a lot of the signs, but I missed them at the time. I start fall of 2019; I start grad school. I'm the most depressed that I think I've ever been in my life, definitely one of the worst periods of my life. That was the semester my dad had a heart attack. It was just really difficult for me to prioritize anything just because getting up was really difficult. I don't know if any of our interviewers have talked about this, but I've been suicidal for multiple periods of my life, and that was one of the periods that I was extremely suicidal in. I've never been institutionalized, though I've come close a lot of times. I talk about this openly, so I would tell people in my family, "Hey, I can make the call myself if it ever gets to that point." It was a really bleak period in my life.

The following spring was a little bit better. I don't know what happened. It was almost over winter break something just snapped and suddenly I started to feel a lot better. Shout out to depression, I guess. I start spring of 2020, second semester of grad school. Things are going great. I'm in classes. Everything is making sense. I am enjoying what I'm learning again.

Then COVID hits, which is fine except that it's difficult for me to do things at home because ADHD. I start to get overwhelmed with things again. I end up trying to drop a political economy class I was taking at the poli sci department, which has been one of my favorite classes I've ever taken, but I just couldn't write the paper. I sent the professor an email. "I'm not writing this paper. I love your class. I love everything that we've talked about, but I cannot emotionally, mentally write this right now." He's fine. He gave me an incomplete. I never wrote the paper. I finished the other two classes with As, so that was fine. One thing about the pandemic, I know it

affected a lot of people in various ways. I think it changed everything. For me, I was extremely almost grateful that it happened when it happened because it forced me to take a break. Also, suddenly it was the first time in my adult life that I've had health care, and it's also the first time where I've had time to use it, because that was the biggest issue before is that whenever I would have health insurance, I never had time because eighteen credits a semester and working forty hours. I never prioritized my health. That's when I finally started—I got COVID in the summer of 2020. I'm super lucky I got COVID.

***That was sarcasm, right?***

It was, yes. I hadn't left my house since March and I got COVID. My brother got sick at work, somebody got him sick, and then I talked to him for two seconds, very far away, and I got sick, as is my luck. My hair started to fall out because I couldn't eat for a month. I didn't eat for a month. I lost twenty pounds or something like that. Then my hair started to fall out. I was like, oh no, I can't have that. I immediately booked an appointment with the dermatologist. He's like, "Yes, sure, this is going to be COVID-related. Your entire scalp is inflamed and it's because you're extremely stressed out." I'm like, me? Stressed out? Never. But, yes, I was super stressed. It's like, I can't have my hair fall out. I immediately booked an appointment with a therapist, which I hadn't seen in years, for my hair. I'm like, I need to destress. I booked an appointment with a therapist. I booked an appointment with a psychiatrist. By the way, both of these professions were extremely saturated. My psychiatry appointment, I booked it sometime around September or early October, and I didn't have it until late November because of the volume of people asking for mental health services was extremely high, and it still is.

***This is a result of COVID.***

Yes. There was no provider under my health insurance that could administer therapy to me because everybody was booked. It was like, “Yes, we can see you and take an appointment in two months, but if I’m honest with you, we’ll only be able to see you every other month,” because of how booked people were. They just couldn’t take on any clients. I had to pay out of pocket for my therapist, which, again, it was something that I was finally able to do. I started to get a lot of answers in terms of my mental health. Everybody in my family decided to go to the psychiatrist except for my mom. My mom doesn’t really believe in psychiatry. It’s not like it’s Santa Claus to believe in. But she doesn’t. She doesn’t trust it. She trusts literally everything else, but she does not trust psychiatry or psychology. We got my dad to go to a psychiatrist. Huge, huge improvement. I will say that I get along with my dad much, much better now than I do with my mom, even, so that flipped happened. But he went to see a psychiatrist. He got tested for ADHD and he has ADHD, which explains why we’re all a mess. Also, he has depression that runs in the family. Bipolar disorder runs on my mom’s side of the family. For a really long time I thought I might have bipolar disorder; I don’t, thankfully. There is nothing wrong with it, but that would suck. I thought one of us statistically were bound to get something, right? But, no, I ended up also getting ADHD. My dad was diagnosed with depression, chronic depression. I have chronic depression and clinical depression, and I have ADHD. I don’t know the actual medical name for it, but it’s skin-picking. I rip out my nails.

***Ouch. You don’t have to share all of this.***

**Yes, you don’t have to.**

It’s totally fine. I think it’s important and all relevant. It’s something that I didn’t notice because we weren’t taught to notice these things. What are my parents going to know about...anything related to psychology or psychiatry? The whole reason I bring up the whole skin-picking thing is

because my grandmother on my mom's side, she had no eyebrows; she would pull out her hair. Just very stressful environments that people grew up in, so genetics are very much involved in all of this. Yes, I was finally able to answer a lot of those questions.

**You've talked about how this is a similar trend in the Latinx environment that we don't talk about mental health. In the project, where do you see that? Did you see that as a common theme as well? Are there specific interviews that stood out to you?**

Sure. It's this thing where if you have something and then... You know the whole "takes one to know one" kind of thing? I think this happens a lot when you're reading. If you suffer from a particular condition and then you suddenly read a book or something, you identify exactly what's happening before it's even stated. You could be like, oh, this person suffers from this thing, just because they're literally describing your experiences to you. When I've read a lot of these interviews and when they've brought up issues with mental health, I think they keep it very superficial. I think they don't dive into it. They try to brush it off. We're taught to keep moving forward, almost. They'll be like, "Yes, but everybody has a bad experience."

***You'll be fine.***

"You'll be fine," exactly. That whole mentality. I would see this a lot. I think the interviews where they talk the most about mental illness in the Latinx community come from psychologists that we've interviewed who talk about sexual violence that happens in the community. They talk about suicidal ideations, but barely. It's not something that's explicitly said. It's something with the younger generation that you see more of. I'm sure that a lot of our narrators have gone to therapy; some of them have talked about therapy, but it's not something that you see older generations talking about or even taking seriously. There is definitely a generational divide, which, by the way, is why I'm as transparent as I possibly can be with it. I don't care. I'm fine.

I'm going to talk about it. It's uncomfortable. It's an uncomfortable topic, but it's a topic that needs to be talked about.

*That's great.*

**Through the pandemic what is maybe one or two lessons that you've taken away from your experiences and hardships thus far?**

The biggest thing that I took is how little everything matters. I know this is extremely horny and *hallmark-y*, but the people around you and the people in your life are literally all anyone has got. I think this was made abundantly clear when people couldn't see their family members. I was in the extremely privileged position where I had access to my entire family, so I couldn't imagine what it was like to not be able to see your siblings or your parents for more than a year. As all these things were happening, I think it forced people to focus on themselves and focus on what really matters, and what really ended up mattering was the relationships they had with other people. I think it taught me to really prioritize relationships and people above anything else, and to prioritize myself, which is something I've always struggled with. That's probably the biggest lesson that I've gotten out of it.

It also took a lot of pressure off of me. I've always felt old, even at twenty. I remember when I was planning on going to New York. I had a professor that wrote me a letter of recommendation. She was like, "It must be so cool living in New York in your early twenties." In my head I was like, "Early twenties? I turn twenty-one next month. I'm super old," which is so stupid. It's so stupid because you're literally twenty. But you don't see that at the time. I've always had this mentality of time slipping away from me, and I think it's something that a lot of people have. Everybody is living with so much anxiety. Then this pandemic happened and you realize that literally nothing matters.

Everybody picked up some obscure, weird hobby. I got really into orchids. My house is full of orchids now.

***Really? I love orchids. That's great.***

I have seven orchids. Everybody suddenly started to do things. A lot of people realized, I don't want to do this; I don't actually love what I'm doing or like it that much. Then that's when I was kind of like, it doesn't matter and, one, I'm not old. I don't think I'm old at all. I think it opened me up to a lot of things. I was talking to my friend yesterday about how...I'm like, it's weird, but I almost feel like I turned nineteen as opposed to twenty-nine in terms of I feel like I can do anything. If there is any particular goal, if I work towards it, I can do it. It took a lot of societal pressures off for me and for a lot of people. Those are probably the two things.

***One last topic that I'd like you to talk about, and we've talked about it before just amongst ourselves, is the term Latinx. You clearly identify as Mexican, maybe Mexican American depending upon the context. That term Latinx still has some controversy in its use. Can you tell me how you first reacted to the use of that word and how you feel about it today?***

I think the first time I ever heard—one, because my dad always forced this whole Mexican thing, I never used the word *Latino* to describe myself. Also, there is the whole fact that a lot of people say I look South Asian or Middle Eastern, so it's never that I was stereotyped with looking predominantly Latino, anyway. I never use the term to identify as that. I never thought about the term. When *Latinx* came up, the friend I was talking about earlier, her name is Elizabeth, who I've known since high school, she started the discussion with me about, “Hey, what do you think about it? I don't know if I like it.” She started to read a bunch of articles. We would just read a bunch of articles on the term. At first I think it's perceived as a very elitist and academic term

that doesn't conform to Spanish grammar from people that oppose the terminology. While I understand that, one, grammar is changing so like, who cares?

I think at first where I was maybe put off by it, or I never identified with it because I never identified with Latino because I'm like, who identifies with Latino? It's such a U.S. centric term, blah blah blah. And then I met Nathalie, and Nathalie is like, "Well, my dad is from El Salvador and my mom is Colombian, so for me, if I say, 'I'm Latina,' I feel like I'm not prioritizing one over the other." I had never thought of that because, of course, narrow minded, I'm only basing everything off my experience, so that's another thing the project helped me with was expanding things beyond my own experience. It's just like, yes, I think that's great.

Also, it's a more inclusive term for the queer community. I know it was borrowed from a lot of those spaces. I was all for it. A lot of people were like, "Well, you could do the E instead of the X; that conforms to Spanish grammar." I don't understand these conversations because at the end of the day if you want to use an E over the X, use the E over the X. I don't see how it's anybody's business what a person identifies as; I don't think it's harmful to anybody. I personally like it. I think X is a much cooler letter than E, and it's not nearly used in enough words, so I think if we can get more uses out of it that's great.

That's how my perspective shifted. It went from me feeling like the term wasn't necessarily for me to being like, okay, well, the term *Latino* in general can describe a lot of people and a lot of people feel comfortable with it, so me embracing that term a lot more. Then with the transition to *Latinx*, it went from being this elitist academic term to just viewing it as something that a lot of people identify with, and if they're comfortable with that I really don't see the harm in using the word. I also don't really care if people are against it. If that's what somebody wants to identify as, they have every right to. As somebody who has study a language



and other languages, grammar isn't real; it's constantly changing. It's not set in stone. This whole, oh, this is not Spanish grammar, no, I don't care. I think it's just excuses that are being made. I think if people are comfortable with the term, they should use it. I personally like *Latinx*. *Latine* is fine, too, with the E. But, I don't know, *Latinx* is more controversial, so I kind of like it a little bit more. But, yes, I try to use it as much as possible now.

***Do you ever hear anyone describing themselves as being Latinx?***

No. No, but that is because I do not really talk to—well, I shouldn't say no. Nobody that I know personally, but I have seen a lot of non-binary individuals or queer individuals use it. Also, when I'm speaking about the community in general, I use *Latinx*. But what people don't understand also is that it doesn't have to be this catchall thing. If you're speaking to a group where everybody identifies as male and everybody comes from the Latinx community, it's perfectly okay to address them as *Latinos* and to still use *Latinas* and to use *Latinx*, which is why I'm like, this isn't really a word that is replacing anything; it's a word that is expanding something and including more people.

***I'm glad to hear you say that because I find myself sometimes, if I'm going to be speaking to a group of White people in particular, change to Latino just so that I don't have to explain the word, although the media is using it more. But older people, older White people in particular, are afraid that it's offensive; I've heard that. They intellectualize it and politicize it. It's like, we have enough controversy; I don't need that in the middle of a conversation. But it's interesting. I've respected how you guys have fielded it and we've grown with it and changed over the last three years.***

**Yes. Talking about that growth and change, how do you think you have changed since the first day you sent in your CV, resume and cover letter?**

I think a lot. I think I've done a lot of things that I didn't think I would have ever been able to do, like I've heard a lot of people's stories, I've read a lot of people's stories, I've read a lot of experiences. Even if I didn't agree, not necessarily didn't agree, but even if I didn't identify with 90 percent of the oral histories that I heard, because that's how vast and different everybody's experience is, you are still able to learn something from everybody, and that's what I got. I can't sit here and say that I learned more from the older generations than from the younger generations because that wouldn't be true. There were a lot of lessons that I took from every single interview that I've been a part of whether they were good lessons or bad lessons, whether I agreed with something or didn't agree with something, and that's what I think is the best part about this particular project and the fact that I, myself, am a member of this community. The minute I don't agree with something, it's in my head. "Well, I don't agree with what's being said." That's obviously a conversation that needs to happen within the community. It's a lot more...looking at it, yes, it's a celebration of a community, but it's also showing the work that still needs to be done within the community because there will always be work that needs to be done. I think for a very long time—I suppose focusing on Latinx seems really precious to me, as I say that in air quotes. Because people have gotten death threats over this word. Buddy, do you want to maybe address more important issues in these particular communities, maybe racism or sexism and misogyny and homophobia? Do you maybe think there are other issues that take priority over this particular term? That's how I feel I've learned from the project and that's how I've been able to engage with my own community, is I've become both more accepting and more critical, though critical in a more constructive way. It's not that I take offense to it anymore. It's that I can hear a different perspective and then I can start formulating my thoughts as to why it is that I

don't agree with this. And the great thing is, is that there is always another oral history that I can point to that is a great defense to something I disagree with and vice versa.

*Great. It's been a pleasure.*

Yes. I'm sorry I talk forever. I told you.

**Thank you.**

*Doesn't every editor say that? We could come back and we could talk for another couple of hours, no problem.*

**We could.**

*Thank you so much, Rodrigo.*

Yes, no worries.

**[End of recorded interview]**

# APPENDIX

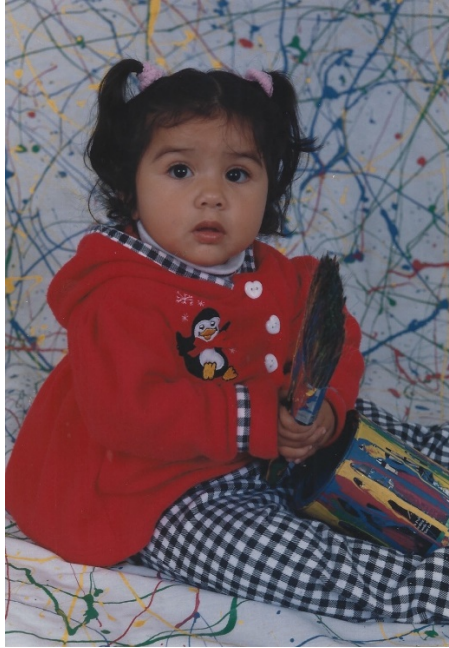


**Above:** Latinx Voices team receives recognition from Historic Preservation, City of Las Vegas in 2019. (L-R): Nathalie Martínez, Monserrath Hernández, Laurents, Barbara Tabach, Rodrigo Vazquez, Elsa Lopez, Maribel Estrada Calderón, Marcela Rodríguez-Campo. **Below:** Rodrigo at his father Javier’s naturalization in Las Vegas.





Rodrigo's mother, Maria, as a child in Mexico.



Clockwise, top left: Luis A. Vazquez (older brother); Stephanie Vazquez (older sister); sister Daniella Vazquez; parents Maria G. Vazquez-Flores and Javier Vazquez with Rodrigo (lap), Stephanie and Luis.