

**Emiliano Chagil**  
**Narrator**

**Lorena Duarte**  
**Interviewer**

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**Mr. Chagil's Office at Augsburg College**  
**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

Emiliano Chagil - **EC**  
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

**LD:** My name is Lorena Duarte, and I'm going to be conducting this interview. It is Wednesday, April 7, 2010. I am with Emiliano Chagil at his offices at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

First of all, I want to say thank you so much, Emiliano, for taking time out to do this.

**EC:** You're welcome.

**LD:** Can you, please, spell your name for me?

**EC:** Yes. It's spelled E-m-i-l-i-a-n-o and my last name is C-h-a-g-i-l, Emiliano Chagil.

**LD:** Thank you.

First of all, I'd love to start off with where you born and where you grew up.

**EC:** I was born in Guatemala by a beautiful town—it's called San Lucas Tolimán—by a well known lake in Guatemala, Lake Atitlán. It's somewhat on the highlands of Guatemala. Basically, that's where I grew up until the age of fifteen or sixteen, and, then, I moved to a different city. I ended in Guatemala City later on. But that's kind of where I grew up, to answer your question. I was born in that neighborhood and grew up there.

**LD:** Can you tell me a little bit about your parents and your family growing up?

**EC:** My parents are Antonio and Margarita. At the beginning, we were at a coffee plantation on a *finca*, as we call it in Spanish. On this coffee plantation, my father especially, he was the man of many skills and many talents. He was a carpenter eighty percent of his life. He was a farmer and he was an electrician. He was a mechanic. So that's kind of how he was employed by this plantation. Pampojila, it's called. My mom was the typical mom, a stay-at-home mom, with five children. But my mom also worked as farmers would do here in Minnesota. The woman definitely stays at home but also helps a lot on the land when it comes to harvest time. That's kind of how my parents were to me.

My dad did, maybe, one or two years of school. My mom never attended school. So my dad definitely spoke Spanish very well, and, also, knew numbers, but he didn't have a formal education per se.

**LD:** When were you born?

**EC:** I was born the fifth of December 1952.

**LD:** You said your father spoke Spanish. Did he speak another language?

**EC:** That's a good question. In the countryside of Guatemala, most of the people are bilingual. The Mayan culture is very much the dominant one; so, therefore, we spoke at home Cakchiquel, which is a Mayan language, and Spanish, which, at the time, was the official language to be spoken in Guatemala. It always has been; although, later on, that's changed a little bit. Now, Guatemala is known to be a multilingual country. But when I was growing up, we had to speak two languages, Spanish and Cakchiquel... Spanish because when I went to school, definitely that was the language used there, and Cakchiquel, that's kind of the language people spoke on the streets. If you didn't speak Cakchiquel, you wouldn't communicate with the rest of your friends, because that's the language they all spoke. But, also, in town, market days and all celebrations, the language was very much visible, so, definitely, we had to speak two languages growing up.

**LD:** Can you spell Cakchiquel for me?

**EC:** There are kind of different ways people spell Cakchiquel, but this is the way I spell it. It's C-a-k-c-h-i-q-u-e-l.

**LD:** Okay, thank you. I want to make sure I get that right.

**EC:** Again, in some other books, you find different spellings.

**LD:** You said you grew up in your original home town until you were about fifteen, or sixteen?

**EC:** Correct.

**LD:** Then where did you go?

**EC:** When I was grown up at the age of six or seven, at this *finca*, the coffee plantation, there was a school for all the kids. There was no law to force kids to go to school, which is still the case in Guatemala. Kids are not...if they decide not to go to school, they can decide not to go to school. I went to school, but after that, after the one or two years of school at that *finca*, that plantation, I got a scholarship to go to a town nearby—that's the town of San Lucas—where they had a public school and where you would go for your six years of grammar school, as we call it down there, the six-years of grammar school. That's where I went. Then, after six years—I'm at the age of fifteen or sixteen—I had another scholarship to pursue my high school, so called, the three years after grammar school. So I went to the city of Sololá, which is at least two hours from my home town. This private school is college-run by the Benedictine priests, American priests from Chicago. I stayed there to complete my bachelor's degree, which is the three years of high school, then two more years for a bachelor's degree. So, now, I'm talking about how I moved away from my family and my home town in San Lucas, and I went to Sololá, which is a different city, always in the area around the Lake Atitlán.

**LD:** I'm sorry. How do you spell Sololá?

**EC:** S-o-l-o-l-á.

**LD:** Sololá. Accent on the "a"?

**EC:** Yes.

**LD:** I just wanted to make sure I get that correctly.

What was that like, that moving away from your family at such a young age?

**EC:** At that time, it was quite unusual for kids to do that. I think I was, perhaps, the first one from the area to get an education at that level, and, also, the opportunity at that level, with full scholarship and to move out of my family, out of my town - my community, and to complete my bachelor's degree. It was unusual in many ways. For me, it was a bit too lonely. Definitely, most of my friends didn't continue school. They didn't have the opportunity that I had. So I felt like I totally abandoned them. I left them behind.

That was great, because, also, I was discovering a new world. I was discovering new people from around the country. It was very much a mixed feeling. Also, it was very unusual for me because I was the first one in the family, of the four boys in the family, to pursue, in this case, higher education and leaving behind the family because of school. Many people do leave family behind because of work. If you had to go somewhere else that's understandable, but, for school, that was unheard at the time for many families. For my parents, who were not very knowledgeable about the education system and the country, they were a bit confused about why I had to go for so many years in school. They wondered why I had to go for six years, and, then, why I had to do five more years and, still, I was not done with the bachelor's degree. So it was a little bit confusing for my family. Here is this young man that's supposed to be working, supposed to be helping the family, supposed to be helping my dad with the land or any other things around the house, and there I was in school. So that was thoroughly, very confusing for a young person. I was enjoying it a lot because, from the beginning, I really thought that school was a cool thing to do. Also, later on, as I was meeting kids from other parts of the country, it was a beautiful experience. I thought it was very much what I wanted to do. It was kind of this campus life, so called, and then when I went home, people were working and just living a normal life, just like living on a farm. So that was a very confusing time for several years, for me, but, nonetheless, I stayed in school.

After the five years in this private school in Sololá, I went on to pursue a degree, an engineering degree, at the University of San Carlos, which is the national university in Guatemala City.

**LD:** Before we move forward, what are some of your strongest memories, say, of growing up?

So before we move on, what are some strong memories that you have of growing up there? What do you remember most? What did you love? What were difficult things about growing up there?

**EC:** I have to start by describing the mountains, which, again, when you grew up in Central America, especially the area where I grew up in Guatemala, I had really great mountains and two volcanoes nearby. That's kind of the first impression. I mentioned the mountains and volcanoes especially because when I left that country behind and I come to Minnesota, it's so flat. Definitely, that's one of thing that I always try to remind myself, the beauty about the mountains and the volcanoes.

But definitely if I have to really recollect all of those great memories growing up in that part of Guatemala, there are so many beautiful things. I think I truly have to go back with how the community was living in harmony. We were poor. We didn't have much at the time. Especially in Guatemala in those days of the 1960s and 1970s, we didn't have good roads, and therefore there was not much traffic, cars on the roads, which, in a way, was good. Again, the community, the people, the friends...it was a simple life like any small town anywhere in the world, but just

living in a world where it was very much far away from the noises of big cities or corruption or drugs or violence. Those things, I never heard of when I was growing up. Truly. Sadly, once in a while maybe, we heard someone got killed accidentally because of this or that. The kids, the youth, in those days, were just busy working, busy leading their own lives, and just doing the normal things. That's kind of that beauty that I remember as I was growing up. The other thing, too, is, as I mentioned, about how close was this community when I was growing up. Kids could go to the neighborhoods. Kids could run and play anywhere. Kids could go and disappear for one or two hours away from family and there was no fear of anything. Also, we were helping each other a lot. We were protecting each other a lot. Other families would just be friendly to everyone. That's one great thing that I have to think about.

A lot of great traditions. Again, strong was the Mayan indigenous community in this part of the country, but, also, Christianity. The Catholic Church was very visible and strong and with the mix of religions, we had some great events, great festivities in the area. I have to mention about Holy Week, because we just passed Holy Week. It was a great thing growing up. It was like a community event. It was very much a time of reflection and parents explained to us about Holy Week, why God's Son died for us, why this, why that. It started with this tradition of Christmas, special Las Posadas, which is well known around the world and Latin America. It's a procession that goes in the community with music, singing, and also people providing food and drinks and those kinds of things. Then, we have this annual celebration at the *finca* Pampojila, because we had our saint. Every small community in Guatemala has their own saint, their patron saint, they call it. We had Saint Andrew, which is why we celebrate his death, Saint Andrew's death. It's Saint Andrews—around November 30<sup>th</sup> or so, a big celebration with marimba music, live music, and, also, dancers and processions. All these celebrations were just community festivities where all people came together. They'd dress up in their best clothes possible. They bought new things. So in a very kind of humble, simple way, it was rich in tradition. It's an amazing thing. We thought that we were poor, we didn't have money, but when it came to traditions and celebrations, people had money.

Also, however, I saw a lot of people struggling with money and health, because at the time when I was growing up, definitely, there were no doctors. As I mentioned to you there were no good roads. Cars would come by once in a while. Trucks would go by once in a while. So doctors or nurses or any access to this new world was kind of far away from us. But, also, it meant bad news for many people that were ill. Children were ill. Women were ill. Because of the lack of medical attention, many of them died. As I look back about this happy childhood and healthy childhood, also, I have to say there were a lot of great kids that grew up with me and died because of illness or because mom and dad didn't have the money to take them to a doctor nearby. So, therefore, they died at a very young age.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** So it's just a reality we have to live with.

**LD:** Sure.

**EC:** So hard work, festivities, but, also the lack of money, the lack of medical attention, and the lack of education meant disaster for many people.

In my case, in my family, close to my family, we didn't see much suffering, but, nonetheless... I'm the third child in my family. The first child is my sister who lives. The second child, a sister, died at the age of one. That could, again, have been prevented, but Mom and Dad didn't have enough money or doctors were not close. Also, this lack of doctors, with no medical attention nearby, meant a lot of great ways of curing illnesses with old traditional medicinal plants and with a lot of *curanderismo*, we call it - kind of a mix of Catholicism with the Mayan tradition. They would worship and they would light candles or incense. There's a lot of this kind of worship and then praying, and they thought they would help kids also with healing, and, in many ways, maybe they did. That's kind of the way people dealt with a lot of illnesses as we were growing up. It's a lot of good stuff, a lot of good things were happening in a very simple way, at the time.

This, again, we're talking about the 1960s and 1970s when in the countryside of Guatemala people were making—my dad specifically—maybe seventy to eighty cents a day and supporting a family of five kids.

**LD:** Wow.

**EC:** It's an amazing story just to think about. Also, life was simple. Life was, perhaps, cheaper in many ways, and, also, being a farmer meant that you could supplement your own life with a little income. Definitely, that income, it's quite a story to support a family of five kids with seventy or eighty cents a day. That's an amazing story.

**LD:** Did you grow your own food?

**EC:** In a way, we did grow our own food. I think my dad, he was busy with being a carpenter, electrician, mechanic, and so on, so he didn't have much time. But most of the people had their corn plantation, black beans, and, also, yucca or potatoes nearby, so a lot of cheaper things you could find nearby, and, plus, you could raise your own chickens or pork and so on.

**LD:** Sure.

**EC:** So, definitely, there was a way to supplement the nutrition, but, also, in this case, you could say, yes, people had enough to eat, but, definitely, there were people that didn't have enough to eat.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** I think malnutrition in the area was a severe case. Again, not too close to us but, definitely nearby, kids were dying because of malnutrition.

**LD:** I'm wondering if there was any tension between Mayan and non-Mayan people or Mayan and non-Mayan cultures.

**EC:** Yes.

**LD:** I know that Guatemala has suffered a great deal with a lot of internal strife and the Maya people in particular have suffered greatly. Did you see any of that growing up?

**EC:** Well, that's the case where I grew up. No obvious tension, but definitely...

Once again, we have to clarify here. In Guatemala, when you say Mayan or indigenous, it means, still today, poor people. Also, we have to clarify that not every Mayan person is a poor person. There are some wealthy Mayans in Guatemala, but, definitely, I would say ninety percent of the Mayan people, the indigenous people, were poor people. That's the case where I grew up. Most of the people were indigenous people, Mayan people, but, also, these were the peasants that were working for this one family that owned the plantation.

Going back to your question, yes, when you have three hundred people who are surviving on fifty cents a day supporting their families, and when you see one single powerful European type of family that owned this whole plantation, well, definitely, many people were questioning. Many of them either felt thoroughly oppressed to work for the plantation with no room for complaining or raising their voice. At the time when I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, people were beginning to question why this man, why this one family has this much land and *us* – we don't have anything.

Actually, it's a great story about it, and not because my dad was involved but, also, other men in our community. There was a huge piece of land that was not being used by the plantation owner, just land that was sitting there. The peasants, these peasants from this community, went to the government and said, "We want the government to buy this land from the owner and, then, distribute it among us, the peasants working for this plantation." This whole issue took maybe ten to twenty years of struggles. Many of the *campesinos* who were part of the organizing

committee lost their jobs. They got kicked out of the plantation because of that. My grandfather Teodoro (“Lolo”) suffered such humiliation and died of a heart attack during such a time. But, nonetheless, they survived, some of them. My dad survived. The government bought that land from the owner and distributed the land among the people. That’s what is called the famous process of land reform in Guatemala.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** In this area where I grew up that was a big victory for many of the peasants. My dad, still, he got a piece of land from that land reform, which my dad now distributed among us, the boys and the girls. All those *campesinos* that fought for that piece of land built their own little village, so called. They have now their own. So they used to work for this one family who owned the plantation. They move out on their own. Now, they work . . . still they help the plantation, but more like a kind of an agreement, a contract they have to sign, which they can claim a better salary, better wages, and for better treatment, too. I think being on their own land, having their own house, at least they have more dignity in saying, “If I need a job, I can go anywhere I want.” But it’s more their choice.

But that’s not the case of Guatemala. As you know and I know, many of us know, the struggles in this fight for land reform and fight for justice continue in many ways for many people. It’s an ongoing struggle in Guatemala.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** This kind of struggle, also, gave room to the conflicts, the civil war that Guatemala suffered for thirty-three years. The Peace Accord was not signed until 1996. So when people ask me why the struggles, why this fighting in Guatemala, exactly it’s about poor against rich or rich against poor. Often it’s mistaken the notion that these are people just fighting because they have nothing else to do. Well, people are struggling because, one, it’s their life.

**LD:** Sure.

**EC:** As I described to you from the beginning, when you see many children die and when you see many women die, and many other people die because of the lack of health care or nutrition or just the treatment of people . . . People have to survive somehow.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** That’s kind of the struggle that’s still an ongoing struggle in Guatemala. That’s, again, the story of just about every similar country in Latin America.

**LD:** Yes, yes, unfortunately.

**EC:** Yes.

**LD:** Thank you. That's really fascinating to think of growing up in a small Mayan kind of community in the 1960s in the mountains of Guatemala. It's something that I think when we call ourselves Latinos in the U.S., sometimes we forget that we have such different backgrounds, and we come from very different places. So thank you for sharing that. That's really amazing.

I want to go back now to . . . You finished your education?

**EC:** Right.

**LD:** You went to the University of San Carlos.

**EC:** Yes.

**LD:** And was that in Guatemala City?

**EC:** Correct.

**LD:** Tell me about your time there and about doing your degree. That was right around the time when the Civil War, I'm sure, was getting very heated.

**EC:** Exactly, it was. Very much. We're talking about 1975, 1976. Yes, the war was on. The Civil War was not visible. It was going on kind of in a quiet way, but the Civil War was boiling in the countryside of Guatemala. Once again, when I decided to go to the University of San Carlos, which is a huge school in Guatemala . . . It's a campus of 30,000, 40,000, maybe 50,000 students.

**LD:** Wow.

**EC:** So it's a big school. The beauty about when I decided to go there was I really wanted to be an agriculture engineer and, also, in my mind was the whole dream that if I would get a degree, I will go back and help my people—or at least help the people, if not my people where I grew up, at least help the poor people in this way. But, again, that's not the way it works in Guatemala. There are very few people that get a degree or very few people to get an education or very few people that are getting ahead. You are absorbed immediately by the plantation owners, very much by the rich people because they want to hire you and keep you. One thing they do, too, is

they keep you to work for *them*, not to work for the poor people. So it's a system that, again, it's hard to explain sometimes, but it's very much a system of the big plantations that we saw here in this country, in the United States, that keeps the people poor, there should not be a system to keep the people oppressed.

**LD:** You mean like the plantation system, like in the South before the Civil War?

**EC:** Exactly.

**LD:** Okay.

**EC:** That was very much an experience that I was not prepared for.

Also, in Guatemala, as I've been saying about the poverty, the struggles of the poor people in general, and no matter who you were in Guatemala, if you were poor, you were poor. You didn't have to be indigenous people to be poor in Guatemala. As we still see today, many people barely survive no matter what kind of ethnic background they have.

Again, speaking for the poor or thinking that you will liberate people or thinking about improving the lives of many people, that, also, was seen as subversive by the wealthy people, the rich people in Guatemala. If you are trying to empower the poor people, organize the poor people, definitely, that was the issue that was provoking the Civil War in Guatemala. And that's why, once again, as I mentioned to you about the school that I went to before with the Benedictines many of the Catholic Church people, we learned about justice, social justice, or the right of the poor, or to be on the side of the powerless or the voiceless. That is very much in the gospel and, also, it's very much in the language and the thoughts of many people who are not part of the oppressors or the wealthy people, so that's a clash of ideology.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** That's kind of what gave room to the war in Guatemala and many other parts of Latin America. Guatemala, specifically, when poor people, peasants or *campesinos*, were empowered to, say, "Take over that land over there," and they did, of course, the owner came with the military on their side and they killed. This is the case with Guatemala. You can still read about massacres here and massacres over there. People were getting killed in bunches because they were trying to feel like maybe they are in the right to take over a piece of land because they didn't have anything. But on the other side, that empowerment went against them and that's the killing that took place in Guatemala. It's all well documented that in Guatemala over 200,000 people die in the Civil War and, also, maybe over a million displaced all over the country, and all over the world.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** Many people took off for Central America, South America, Europe, and many people, also, came to the United States. That's kind of also what gave me a reason to leave the country, too. I left Guatemala in 1980.

**LD:** Yes, that's where I was heading. Did you finish your degree there in San Carlos?

**EC:** I was at my last year. I did my five years of engineering, and I was on my sixth year in engineering. We're talking about here 1979, 1980, which, as you read the history of Guatemala in those days, were the darkest part of the Civil War in Guatemala. Unfortunately and it's very sad, I still think about the moments that students and professors were getting killed like flies. Once again, we have to put in context that the University of San Carlos is an autonomous institution, which, also, with its own autonomy kept its independence from the government. So the San Carlos, the national university, was more on kind of the liberal side of it and more kind of in opposition to the oligarchy in Guatemala or the wealthy people in Guatemala and that kind of gave room for many things to happen. Even the government went on national TV declaring that the University of San Carlos was subversive. It's a site for communism and, therefore, professors and students getting killed. It was the case of many, many people getting killed. We're not talking about only university students and professors; we're talking about, also, priests and many Catholic people who were getting killed because they were on the side of the poor.

**LD:** That was a time of liberation theology.

**EC:** In a way, yes—not so much in Guatemala in this case, but it's true.

**LD:** Did you become involved with the movement or the student political student movements?

**EC:** Well, yes. Anytime, in those days, if you were part of San Carlos, you are in it. [Laughter] You didn't have to sign a piece of paper to be an official member.

Also, it's so hard not to take the side of the poor. When you grow up with the experience that I have described before, watching *campesinos*, watching families die, and watching people losing their house or losing their children and not to have a future at all and when you discover, also, the wealthy side of Guatemala... There is so much wealth in Guatemala. That's why when people ask me why is your country so poor, I always tell them, "My country is a rich country...poor people, but a rich country." That's the case of Guatemala. The farther you move up, you discover this wealth in Guatemala.

That's the case when I ended up at San Carlos. I had so many great friends who were from wealthy families, great kids, great classmates, and so on, but, also, I was beginning to question my own identity. Am I going to be absorbed by this wealth, this other side of the country, this other half of the country, if you have to say it that way? I had to question myself, and I couldn't do that, just forget where I came from. Being associated with the Catholic Church and where I grew up, definitely, I felt like I had to be part of the poor, in that case, in general. If that's the case, I, also, knew that if I didn't take care of myself, if I wasn't careful of where to go and what to do and what to say, I mean I would have died or they would have killed me, whoever. I saw many friends, many colleagues get in and disappear. Even from my hometown, I saw a guy that kind of worked together with him, and, one day, he went to take care of some business, and they must have just kidnapped him and he never showed up after that, and that happened to many other people, too.

Again, I could not say I couldn't be part of the rich, because I was not a rich boy and, also, the ideology behind being rich in Guatemala, it's a dangerous thing. Also, you think about being with the poor, you run another risk. In Guatemala, the case is you do not have to be... When people thought we have Marxism and Communism or subversion and those kinds of things, I said, "What is that," you know? In Guatemala, you don't have to know about all things to take the side of the poor. It's just as simple as watching the people live in the poverty, live with those low wages, or no education, no health care, no access to any other lives. You didn't have to know about Marx or Fidel Castro, whoever. It still seems to me like a joke when people ask me how much do you know about those things? You didn't have to know about things. When you live a life in Guatemala, when you know what the poor go through, that's a lesson on its own. I couldn't abandon that. I still, every time I go to Guatemala... Guatemala hasn't changed. You still go and you still see the poor people struggling. I was hopeful that a solution would come to Guatemala and from the government to the people, but that's still a dream. That story continues.

**LD:** Tell me what prompted you, then, to move to Minnesota? Let's go into that phase of your life.

**EC:** Again, we are talking about here the worst years, the years of the Civil War in Guatemala. I was finishing my degree, but, at the same time, watching so many people disappear, getting killed, professors and students and union leaders and any type of leaders in the community. More than once, people said to me, "Emiliano, you have to be careful, because you are the one who is educated. You're the one from a community that could use a lot of help with social justice, but, also, you're the one that could disappear if you're not very careful." That's kind of what I thought. Sooner or later, I had to do something with my life. So many of my friends disappeared, were taking off for Puerto Rico, disappearing, just disappearing to Costa Rica or to other parts of South America. They were running away, and I remember several of my friends said to me, "Hey, if you have a chance to leave the country, go, man." Many, many of my school buddies

left and came to Mexico and they came to the United States. I wasn't sure if I would just leave like just one day, disappear. I was very much concerned about my family. Once again, I was explaining to you how close we were as a community growing up. You cannot just disappear from a community like that. It's so hard.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** It took me forever, but with the help of other people, I got a visa and I thought I would come up here for one year. The priests who were in my area were from Minnesota, so that's how I got to know about Minnesota, and I met several people from Minnesota in Guatemala, especially this professor who was teaching at Mankato State University at the time.

**LD:** What was his name?

**EC:** I know it's Burt, B-u-r-t. Burt always was into research, agricultural research and so on. He said to me, "Whenever you come to the States, you should come to Minnesota, because there's so much to learn about Minnesota agriculture and the whole development." Of course, Minnesota, it's the land of agriculture and great people.

One day, I had to go to the priest in my area, the priest in my parish, the Catholic Church in the area, and said, "I need the help. I need the help to get out of this country at least for one year. I could learn more agriculture. I could learn more of the language, but, also, you have to understand there's something going on here in Guatemala. It's very dangerous and many people will get killed, more and more." The priest didn't know much what was going on. In a way, it's good news/bad news. Sometimes, priests don't read the news which I'm glad they don't, because it's very scary. But, also, it can be dangerous because he was not quite aware of how serious was Guatemala with the Civil War and many people getting killed and so on. So he was not so sure, but he said, "Maybe it's a good idea." I brought him some reports about the killings going on, the professors were disappearing, and students were disappearing and union workers, union leaders. So he understood that I had to come to Minnesota, come to the States. We weren't sure about Minnesota, but I thought let's start with Minnesota. Plus, I had some friends from Guatemala living here.

One day, we thought, well, maybe it's time to go. It was a very sad moment. It was very, very much a confusing time for me because there was my country that I love, Guatemala, my people, and, also, understanding the reality of what was going on, which is good news/bad news. Maybe I never would have gone to the university and maybe I never would have understood much what was going on, but, going to the university, I really saw the reality of the struggles, ideological and, also, the armed forces and the whole capitalism, communism, socialism, and those kinds of things, *and*, also, the theology going on. Again, it's not just to pick one piece of the many. It's a

whole country coming to a clash, and that was the case in Guatemala. So I left the country behind and I came to Minnesota April 21, 1980. Actually this is my 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, thirty years.

**LD:** Wow!

**EC:** It's sad leaving the country behind, but, at the same time, I woke up to this whole new world in Minnesota.

**LD:** You weren't married or anything?

**EC:** No.

**LD:** So you came by yourself?

**EC:** Right.

**LD:** You came to study agriculture and what was that like?

**EC:** Well, again, the beauty about it...leaving a country behind with mountains and volcanoes and you come to this flat land here and it's like *wow!*

**LD:** [Laughter]

**EC:** This is so different. At the same time, it's beautiful. I went to live for a good time at Mankato where this professor was teaching at the time. He also took me around Mankato, to places such as Waseca, Minnesota, and, also, I went to live on a farm by New Ulm, Minnesota. So I was trying to get a feel for what was this state. I thought it was beautiful, not just the land but, also, the people.

Minnesotans, especially the people in the small towns, kind of the farmers, are very much down to earth just like Guatemalans, very much close to the land. They live a simple life. Also, once again, there I was questioning how much these people—I'm talking about North Americans this time—know exactly what's going on in Guatemala.

**LD:** Sure. Yes.

**EC:** Of course, many of them didn't know much—in a way, good news/bad news. Good news because they made me feel like I was far away from the heat, so called, in Guatemala. The sad news or the bad news for me was that I couldn't find people that would sympathize with my pain

inside, my anger, my frustration, my politics. A few people were understanding, very few people, until when I moved to the metro area. Again, it was a great experience, was a good change, good switch of world for me. Minnesota, I thought, was very clean and well organized and it's very quiet.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**EC:** Wow! Living in Guatemala City with the noise, the traffic, and everything, it's a strange world. It was kind of a fresh start, so called, with a new life.

**LD:** Your original idea was to stay for one year?

**EC:** Correct.

**LD:** [Laughter] And thirty years later . . .

**EC:** Thirty years later. I wonder where the years went.

**LD:** Yes. What made you stay?

**EC:** That's kind of the mystery of this whole life. I thought one year would go by . . . would take forever, and it went by fast, I think with the newness, with the new world, new people, new language, new culture. It was very much... I thought, wow. This in many ways kind of helped me to calm down with thinking about the war going on in Guatemala. Again, as I said, I came as a prospect student so I was doing a lot of little things around in Minnesota to learn more, to see more, and listen to a lot of things.

Yes, I met many people. Again, we're talking about 1980 here and the news out of Guatemala was not getting any better. It got just worse and worse and worse. There were so many people, even from Guatemala, and special people here, and I'm really grateful for that type of people who said to me, "Hey, man, you don't have to go back. You could stay for a couple more years until things settle down and then you can go back. For now, maybe you should just stay up here." That was kind of the beginning.

**LD:** Did you move to the...?

**EC:** Yes, I moved to the metro area because down there in Mankato, I just couldn't find a community. Once again, maybe because the life of the university, I was living down there [in Guatemala] with, ideas and the intellectual curiosity, intellectual excitement and in the countryside you don't see much of that.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** So I was moving into the metro area. Even the professor, at that time, said to me, “You should try the metro area and see what happens.” So they helped me to extend my visa for another year. And now I had more friends, more people around after one year. Then, even some sponsors pay for my school here at the University of Minnesota to get an intensive course in English... I don’t know what it’s called now. It was an English class. It’s a kind of pre-college type of English. It’s very expensive, very much kind of a rush type of course.

**LD:** An intensive course?

**EC:** Yes, an intensive course. I took that and I remember my sponsor paid for that. By living here in the metro area, being exposed to the language—it’s a gift as I look back now—really exposed me to more the kind of life that I was living in Guatemala City, more intellectual, more kind of fine politics, fine this, fine that.

So I thought this is great and, in a way, kind of mysterious. There I was meeting some people from the linguistics department. As I chat with them and as I got to know them, I told them that I spoke these Mayan languages—well, at least I *claim* to speak those Mayan languages.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**EC:** They said, “Hey! that’s great. In this part of the world, we don’t hear much about those Mayan languages.” There was one professor that lived and came out of California, so she knew more about these Mayan languages because more exposed to the Mayan people or Guatemalan people in Los Angeles or California. She was doing a three-year project here at the University and said, “Emiliano, maybe you should just come and help us and shape this program and work with us and those kinds of things.” So there I was and I thought wow! Why not?

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** Then with extending my visa, and I had a temporary work permit, there I was at the U of M because I had a unique skill with languages and so on. And I began to meet more people, so my second year went a bit faster and better in many ways. But, again, all of this while keeping an eye on Guatemala and Central America.

At that time, also, the Newman Center, which was a religious kind of spiritual center at the University of Minnesota, was housing these kinds of solidarity groups, the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan groups, the Guatemalan groups.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** We're talking about the wars of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala at the same time.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** With these people, I felt more like, okay, now I have some more people to talk to, more stuff to share, and I met a few more Guatemalans. Even I met two professors, who also were somewhat in exile in the Twin Cities, so we had more things in common. There we were talking more. That was the beginning for me. I thought, okay, I think I could survive another year or two years.

It just went on. And as you know, the war in Guatemala never got any better . . . just worse and worse.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** Then, after two or three years, we're talking about maybe three years or five years later, there was an amnesty for people out of Central America to apply for, so many people said, "Hey, why don't you just apply? You'll decide later to stay or go." Then, I was beginning to really like this life up here and I'm meeting some great people, great Minnesotans just for their kindness. The not so great about it is that, again, we're talking about the war in Guatemala, Civil War in Guatemala, and then, also, we're talking about the intervention of the U.S. in this war.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** That was a tricky part for me because many Minnesotans and many people, even still today, don't want to admit how powerful, how direct was the intervention of the U.S. in the war down there.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** I was kind of frustrated. But, also, that's a life that I had to deal with. I had to learn how to deal with the politics and the normal life down there. I couldn't blame people for not knowing, for not accepting the reality. For me, it was about how to save my life now and, also, how not to jeopardize the life of my brothers and sister in Guatemala or my friends, because, once again, in Guatemala, if you're singled out as a community leader or whatever leader you are, also, they look around who else is actually here with you? So this is the other part that later on I discovered that it wasn't just *my* life that I was protecting. It wasn't just my life that I was saving...it was

also the lives of many other people. So as I looked at the bigger picture, I thought, okay, the farther I'm from Guatemala maybe the safer are my brothers and relatives and neighbors and friends.

I was discovering this new world here. Plus, at the time, in 1980 here in the Twin Cities, Central Americans or Latinos were like these exotic beings, if you will.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**EC:** We were new and speaking Spanish, and we knew a lot of the politics, and we were friendly, and so on. So I felt like people were really welcoming the new things coming to them, as painful as it could have been for them, also for us was hard to see people who were refugees, and people in exile, and those kinds of things. But, at the same time, I felt like this is a great place.

I have to, also, mention that around the second year or third year in Minnesota, I got an invitation to go to Davis, California, from a family that were trying to adopt a son from anywhere in the world, that were offering a house, everything, scholarship, education, everything. They invited me to join their family. Who wouldn't go to California if you're living in Minnesota?

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** Also, I had a good friend, who now lives in California but he was from New York, living in Boston, who, also, invited me to see the east coast. So west coast, east coast, or the Midwest? As I looked back, I thought, no, I will stay in Minnesota, and I will survive Minnesota. Definitely, there was something about Minnesota that I felt was unique in many ways. Maybe it was because they did not know much about politics, in a way it was kind of fresh. They were kind of isolated from the rest of the world in that way, not that they were not smart, but, definitely, still, you feel like you are far away from the world.

**LD:** Yes, yes.

**EC:** That was kind of a new thing to me. So I declined to go to California and I declined to go to the east coast; although, I visited there later on. I decided to stay in Minnesota. Really, this is a choice of heart to stay in Minnesota in many ways. There are beautiful things and beautiful people here, and it's a good life.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** It's a good life. It's a different life. Yes, all Latinos complain about it. "Boy, there's no life here for us Latinos."

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**EC:** We still feel that way, but, at the same time, okay, there is no life? Do your life.

**LD:** Yes, yes.

**EC:** Make the things that you want to do. That's the beauty of it.

**LD:** Actually, I want to ask you about that. As you were saying when you first came, it was exotic, you know. There weren't that many Central Americans.

**EC:** No.

**LD:** What has the evolution of the Latino community been like?

**EC:** I think, once again, I saw it and I'm a witness of the whole evolution. When I came to Minnesota in those days, yes, I was living in the metro area, I lived nearby, and South Minneapolis kind of became home for me. I lived there for almost ten years of my life. I saw the whole area of South Minneapolis going down with prostitution, drugs, and violence, you name it. Now, totally, it's gone, that bad neighborhood. There's not the danger that we saw that was there before. So that whole evolution of the Latinos coming and becoming a business oriented type of people . . . That's really very much a beginning for me.

Later on, I got a job with Catholic Charities working for refugee resettlement, which is a fascinating story in itself. It took me to Saint Paul and, also, I saw the little store that was a burrito market that now is a huge one [El Burrito Mercado].

**LD:** Yes!

**EC:** I saw the little restaurant that was Boca Chica; now, it's a huge one.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** Even La Clinica, the La Clinica on the west side, was just a tiny little clinic; now, it's a huge one. The Neighborhood House was just kind of a little building; now, it's a huge one. So south Minneapolis, the whole Lake Street or the whole of Nicollet Avenue, Hennepin Avenue,

and so on, it is just a fascinating story to see. It's just a beautiful demonstration of what people can do in a new land, and what many good things they came with.

Again, I have to mention your father, Mario Duarte, was a good friend from the beginning, and, also, because he knew what was happening in El Salvador and Guatemala.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** We Salvadorans and Guatemalans always feel like we are from the same country.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** So your father and I kind of became like these brothers, you know. Still today, we see each other as more than just friends, and, also, because we knew the reality of our people. We knew the reality of our countries. Also, we knew that we were in a land with many possibilities. Your father, for instance, how much he worked hard from the beginning, to radio shows to television to newspapers and magazines. I mean that was a new beginning for him, too.

**LD:** Yes, it was.

**EC:** I remember a conversation with your father—this is *way* back—and something happens and he asks me, “Emiliano, I have an idea about a newspaper or a magazine.” Well, any news is good news in this part of the world, and he decided to go with *La Prensa* [*de Minnesota*].

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** That was the beginning. Now, we have newspapers in Spanish. Now, we have newspapers with the name in Spanish, *La Prensa*, for instance, and later on there came many more newspapers. Still, today, we see directories in Spanish. So it's like this whole new world, television, and radio now. We have a Guatemalan who lives in Chaska and he has a radio show and so on, and Mexicans, and Central Americans. Even now, South Americans have radio shows in South Minneapolis and so on. This whole evolution, you can call it a revolution, because really they came to change the world. Definitely, it sounds like a song from the Beatles, but, definitely, they came to change the world—and for good.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**EC:** I truly think that it's not just that they're good people. They have good ideas. They have good habits, hard working people. These people, like your father and many others, they did not sleep nights and days just to keep going. As you know, putting together a business in this country

is no picnic. It's hard work, long hours, and you are on your own. A lot of the rules and regulations you have to learn that are totally new. Even in our country, in our own language, we don't understand the laws and regulations. [Laughter] So how many people have struggled with trying to understand everything?

Speaking of the whole evolution of the Latino Community, in 1980 or 1981, if you would have said to people, "Boy, Spanish is going to be a second language in this country," they would have looked at you like what's wrong with you.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** Today, well, it just began. Spanish is a second language in this country.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** Every single box you open from Menards to Home Depot or anywhere has Spanish instructions and also other languages and so on. So that whole evolution really involves the Twin Cities and our Latino community and the Hispanic community. It's beautiful. It's not just business. It's also education.

**LD:** I was going to say...because you're kind of talking about the growth of the Latino community. What do you think that that growth has contributed to Minnesota as a whole?

**EC:** Well, again, I think on the academic side, any incorporation, any ambition of knowledge that adds to the mainstream knowledge is always good. It generates new sources of knowledge and makes people curious about what to learn, what more to learn. This whole curiosity, this whole enrichment to the education is in elementary schools . . . well, even in pre-school these days. Even the teachers, the instructors in pre-school are bilingual, multi-lingual, which, before, I'm sure they didn't have those kind of skills. Once again, they really incorporate Spanish in every aspect of life. I think, once again, that the education, the curiosity really takes us to the whole growth of the economy.

Also, this country began to realize that, okay, if we are going to compete, we better know how to sell or how to buy or how to communicate with people, so Spanish, Latinos, kind of woke up. It kind of woke up the giant, woke up this whole sleeping bear, so called. I think it's been good to the country, not just to the local community, but, also, it's been good to the country as a whole—and rightly so. Now, today, you hear from hospitals, to day care, to nursing homes that we need bilingual people.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** We need bilingual people. You hear so many other stories, too, that this new influx of immigrants or Latinos, people that come not just to sit around. There are people that live six, seven of them in one small apartment just to stay alive, but they work two, three, four jobs if necessary,

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** If you give them the opportunity to extend their business, they do, and that's the case clearly, as you can see anywhere you go. It's a fascinating change, and it's been good for the country as a whole. I truly believe that. Again, in education, religion, and so on, it's a beautiful thing.

**LD:** Do you want to take just a little break and get some more water?

**EC:** Sure. Yes.

**LD:** Okay.

[break in the interview]

**LD:** This is the continuation of my interview with Emiliano Chagil.

We kind of finished talking about the growth of the Latino Community in Minnesota and the contributions of the Latino community. I want to go back and talk a little bit more about you and the evolution of your career and how you ended up here at Augsburg College. Tell me your position here at Augsburg.

**EC:** I'm the director of the Hispanic Latino Student Services here on campus.

**LD:** Okay. I want to get an idea of how from those early years here in Minnesota you came to be in this position. I know that you, also, got some more education; you got another degree. So tell me a little bit about that.

**EC:** The beauty of it is that I was exposed to education at the early age. Also, the beauty of it is that many people supported me and convinced me that I was smart enough to be in school.

When you think about mentors and people giving you positive feedback, I think I have to go back and look at those great people that helped me from my home town in Guatemala, to Minnesota, and here I am today at Augsburg College. Also, the whole component of education

has been there for me forever. I should have my Ph.D., but, unfortunately, I did not do the Ph.D. for the lack of money and, later on, with family.

I left Guatemala with my bachelor's degree, but, also, an unfinished engineering degree. When I came to Minnesota, as I mentioned to you, I almost thought about linguistics, to do linguistics. Many professors talked to me that I could do very well in linguistics. But I thought it was a little bit too abstract, too much away from the reality I was living. That's kind of what I thought. Maybe I had to find something that will help me to work with people, help other people, or always connect Central America or Guatemala with Minnesota, always looking at that bigger picture.

When I was working with Catholic Charities as a coordinator of refugee resettlement, I discovered that I could do very well working with people, but, also, knowing more about how to assist people, in general. The whole component about social justice was still there for me. Because of my Catholic education and so on, plus now working with Catholic Charities in Minnesota, I had the opportunity to visit the School of Divinity at the University of Saint Thomas. Once again, I met some great people there, and, also, they gave me a sense that, "Why don't you just join our program and see what you can go with or do with some classes here and there?" As I was studying some theology classes and taking classes about the church and many other things, finally, I decided, well, maybe, I should just do my master's degree here. So I ended up doing a master's degree in theology at Saint Thomas.

That's kind of the beginning. It opened new doors not just opened my eyes, but gave me a sense that with more education in this country, you can do more and better things. Thank goodness, with that, also, you could make more money and live with the dignity that also came with it.

When I finished my degree, I also left Catholic Charities. I thought I'd better expand my world and learn more about what to do, but, still, very close to the whole ideal that I should be in service of my people. I should help other kids. So when I saw this position here at Augsburg College as the director of Hispanic Latino Student Services, I thought - I know what education can do to a person. I know how much struggle minorities, in general, or Latinos in this case, go through when they go to school. As much as I enjoyed education, also, I knew how expensive it was going to graduate school. So I thought this job would be just the right job for me, and, in a way, as us Catholics or Christians like to say, "Well, maybe, this is a call that came from above, the right job for the right person." The beauty of it, going back through that whole mystery of it, is that they had a position open for over a year. They were interviewing people. They couldn't find anyone. I thought I should apply for it. There, they were offering me the job. I thought, wow, this is great. Plus, I knew a little bit about Augsburg College before. So I thought this is great. This is a great occasion. I like the metro area. I like the city environment. Now, I could be helping other Latinos to pursue their education, to do some advocacy for them, to support them

emotionally, spiritually, or culturally. I thought maybe this is it. I have seen, through my ten years now here at Augsburg College, so many great people coming and going, Central Americans or Puerto Ricans. Bear in mind, as all Latinos, we have something in common, the language and, also, our culture of being social. We are very social. I think it's been good for the kids that I've been here for them, and it's been very much good for me.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** It really has kept me close to my culture, close to my country, plus reinforcing daily that whole idea about education, education, education.

**LD:** This was ten years ago, so it would have been in 2000?

**EC:** Two thousand, correct.

**LD:** When did you get your master's?

**EC:** It could have been at least two or three years before.

**LD:** Before that?

**EC:** Yes.

**LD:** I just kind of want to fill in the gaps a little bit. You told me about working for Catholic Charities. You said that was really interesting work. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

**EC:** Yes. Once again, at the time of the 1980s, going back . . . I don't know how many people left Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. There were many of them that came into the United States, not just to stay in the United States, but, also, going through Minnesota on their way to Canada, a bunch of them. In a fascinating way, there I was, again, in a great job helping people, in a sense. I have a great article—I should find it for you—written by the *Minneapolis Tribune*. I should maybe give you a copy later on.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** It's about that type of work. For me, it was very much sad because they brought me the whole memories about growing up in Central America, poor, indigenous, the countryside, no access to education, plus, now, running for their lives everywhere.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** I saw men and I saw women with children from Central America, my people. There I was. I saw a lot of people in Minnesota from Guatemala or Nicaragua, too, either on their way to Canada, and we helped them to find a house, helped them to find schools, to find legal documents, or take them to immigration. I still remember one time I went to immigration with some other people to talk to the head honcho of immigration to tell them that they should treat my people in a more respectful way, not to chase them around as if they were not humans. That kind of brought me back to the days in Guatemala.

**LD:** Sure.

**EC:** Once again, here I am helping, protecting the families, but, also, I thought Catholic Charities and other institutions were doing a great job trying to assist these people. Again, not just the Catholic Charities, but Lutheran Social Service, and a lot of churches in the area were trying to help these Central Americans. Some of them were very quiet, just trying to stay alive, and some became more vocal and so on. But, again, we all are different. For me, it was a great experience of the reality back home and the reality here in this country. As much as we mentioned about the intervention of the U.S. in these wars in Central America, at the same, here I was meeting these generous, kind people trying to help Central Americans. I saw many young men, young women, older folks trying to stay alive. Many of them did good. Many of them just took off. They went somewhere else.

For Minnesota, it was, also, a new beginning because here we were talking about Central America in the news. Even more obvious, we became neighbors of people that never knew about where Guatemala was. So we were exposing them to many other things and, also, traditions and celebrations, those kinds of things, especially in Catholic Churches. In remembrance of the 1980's, just this year just this year [2010] for instance, we know that Óscar Romero Day now has been declared an annual event commemorating his death, for instance. So this church connection with other churches was a fascinating story to kind of unfold in front of me in Minnesota: the refugees, the war, and resettling refugees. Minnesota was a great state, especially in those days for jobs, all types of jobs, and, also, people were very helpful and very generous. It was a great experience.

**LD:** Talking about the immigration experience here in the United States . . . Do you think that it's gotten better, worse, is the same, is about the same but different? How do you see that?

**EC:** I would say still the same as it used to be. One thing, once again, speaking from the United States, I'm a U.S. citizen now and I'm proud of it, but, it, also, has taught me, this is a country of laws and rules and regulations and policies and those kinds of things, which for many of us

growing up in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, rules and regulations, laws, what is that, you know?

**LD:** [Chuckles] Yes.

**EC:** Not to blame people not knowing about those things, it's just because rules and regulations and laws never really were for the poor people. Rules and regulations and laws were for the wealthy people that were ruling the country. So when we came to this country, talking about laws and other things, it was like, well, what's in it for me, you know. Why do I have to do that?

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** Going with the laws and regulations in this country, definitely, it's still hard for many Latinos to understand. You cannot just cross the border into a country and, tah-dah, here I am, you know. You have to go through a lot of things. Also, the sad story about Central Americans, or Mexicans, or any Latinos is that if you want to go through the legal process to enter the United States, it can take you from minimum two, three years to five years or ten years.

**LD:** Or twenty.

**EC:** Or twenty.

**LD:** [Laughter] This is the reality.

**EC:** Exactly. So why not just cross the border which you can do in one day? That's the tricky part. Again, I hope the United States one day wakes up and realizes there's a lot of corruption going on with the laws, especially on the border, a lot of things going on there.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** But also the whole story behind refugees is that they're running for their lives.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** They're running to find a different life, a better life, a better future for their kids. If you ask parents why did you go through this trouble coming to this country, the first thing is "I wanted a better life, a safer life, and, also, a future for my kids." That's it, which is, ironically and sadly, the dichotomy or the paradox about this country. This country supports wars in Central America. At the same time, this country supports a new life for refugees and immigrants who are running for their lives. So which is which?

Definitely, for many of us that have left our country behind and this became home for us, the whole immigration thing hasn't changed much.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** It's still the same, but, also, they need to keep going with the laws and regulations. Definitely, the United States has to understand more of what's going on in Latin America, why people are running for their lives.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** I don't think they do it because they have nothing to do. They are running for their lives. They want a better future.

Going back to the whole immigration thing . . . The component that has changed a little bit, the tone of what has changed here and is very much what many people are talking about, is why the law seems—at least the approach of the United States towards immigrants from Latin America—it's more drastic and more harsh this time around. Many people kind of put the finger on, well, that it is because of the color of our skin. We are brown-skinned, dark-skinned and, therefore, this country doesn't want us. For centuries, and still today, the United States, the people that speak for this country, like to convey that this country is of white people not of brown people, not of yellow people, not of red people. It's of white people. Maybe so. But, I think one day, they have to realize that they shouldn't be so harsh on people, *if it's true* that it's just for the color of their skin. You hear this often, "Oh, if they were from Eastern Europe or from other countries, I'm sure they wouldn't be so harsh." Many people that came from Europe, that have come from other countries, Norway, the Scandinavian people, have come to this country illegally. Yes, that was the old day; now, it's today. I hope that the laws or the approach of the United States towards Latin Americans is not because of the color of their skin. I hope not.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** I still believe in this country that lives by laws and regulations and policies. It's fine with me. At the same time, they have to understand more, that people need to survive. They need to find a better life and stay in a safer place.

**LD:** Yes. Let's talk about your family. I know you have a family. You're married.

**EC:** Yes. I don't know how many years I've been married. [Chuckles] But I've been married and have two kids. [Laughter]

**LD:** What are their names?

**EC:** The older one, the nine-year-old, is Teodoro Charles and the younger one, the six-year old, is Grant Antonio. Both of the boys are named after grandparents. Teodoro, the older one, is my mom's dad, my Grandpa. Again, that's a story in its own. Teodoro was part of the whole land reform, too, in the old days, as I mentioned before. With my family, it's just great to have these kids to remind me of their grandparents. So Teodoro Charles and Grant Antonio [Grandparents], Antonio is my father, the grandpa. It's great, because I'm exposing them to the language, to the culture, to the country. As I mentioned to you, we travel. We take this one every-year-trip to Guatemala. But, also, their names kind of remind me of the reality that we lived back home, and this is the reality we live today. Of course, with children, the way we live in this state, it's hard for them to understand the hardships, the poverty.

**LD:** Sure.

**EC:** When I tell them there are some families in my home town that don't have toys, they don't believe that, or that there are families in my town that maybe don't have enough food for tomorrow, it's hard for them to understand, to believe that.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** Nonetheless, I try to expose them as much and try to make them understand as much. Also, going back to your question before . . . how much the Latino culture has changed Minnesota. I think these kids, the older kid, for instance, when I asked him, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" One thing he likes to say is, "I want to speak Spanish. I want to be a doctor and go and help people in Guatemala."

**LD:** Oh, wow.

**EC:** I think that's a beautiful thing. I don't think this kid would have said that if he was not exposed to the Latin culture or to Guatemalan culture. I assume that's, also, the case of many, many kids. I think our culture has, also, interjected this curiosity of many other younger people to think that I'm not just going to have a profession and be rich and wealthy in this country, but, also, think about things beyond the borders of this country. In many ways, it's a great story.

**LD:** Yes.

Tell me a little bit about what you see as the challenges that the Latino community faces in years ahead.

**EC:** There are so many challenges. I mentioned before the opportunities that this state, this country has for us. But the challenge is still education, the biggest. That's a well-documented case. Latinos or minorities, in general, in this country don't accomplish, don't complete their degrees for many reasons, and money is one of the many. Education has to be a top priority for many Latinos to overcome in this country. That's a big challenge and not because they're not smart, which I remind the kids.

I just had a Latina, a young woman, here yesterday. She wants to join Augsburg College, but she more than once said in her conversation, "Well, maybe I'm a stupid Latina thinking this way," until I reminded her, "Just because you're a Latina, does not mean you're stupid." It refers to the desire to get an education but without money.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** That's kind of attitude unconsciously, we put down ourselves, and we have to overcome that. We are just as smart as anyone. We're just as intelligent as anyone. We could become, now as today we see, in the history of this country, Latinos being astronauts. We see Latinos like Sonia Sotomayor, for instance, who is now in the Supreme Court.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** So, definitely, we have a lot to overcome, but we're role models. We need more. Thank goodness, our music is more in the mainstream now. Our actresses and actors are more and more visible now than ever. But we need to overcome the view that we are not just poor people. We are not just a sub culture. We are Minnesota. We are the U.S.A. And we mean business. You see the buying power of the Latino culture. You see the investments of the Latino culture. Once again, if not for Latinos, the market for houses in South Minneapolis will collapse. A lot of those houses were, maybe, just \$100,000; now, they're \$200,000.

**LD:** Right.

**EC:** Well, that's one thing we need to begin thinking about, as we are investors, as we are future scientists and future doctors. That's a lot of the challenges.

Another thing that we also need to overcome is not just education but, also, the incorporation of ourselves as part of this culture. Not too long ago, in years past, I used to organize this big dance at the Minneapolis Convention Center. A few questions that came to me were, "Why are you organizing this big dance?" and, "Why in the Minneapolis Convention Center?" My answer to that was that I really want Latino people to feel like their culture, their music, are part of the

mainstream, and also to come to downtown and to feel like this is my city, this is my town. This is me, you know. Instead of kind of as commonly we hear about how immigrants and refugees in this country live in their ghettos. I dislike that word ghetto. I hope Latinos get out of that ghetto mentality. That's, again, one of the many things that we need to overcome. So intellectually, culturally, socially, we need to overcome that. We shouldn't see ourselves as a sub culture. We need to incorporate ourselves in the mainstream. The funny thing is that many people in the mainstream culture like to see Latinos also succeed.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** It's hard to succeed, but it's possible. It's possible. We see more and more Latinos now being professors, being doctors, being lawyers.

I just saw the headline of the *Tribune* today. It says that the law school at Saint Thomas or Hamline, most of these people that become lawyers are white people. So Saint Thomas is becoming more aware and begins to approach that differently, to incorporate more and more people of color, like Latinos. So I think we Latinos have to overcome that kind of, oh, I cannot do it because I'm a Latino. Oh, I cannot do it because I'm poor. Oh, I cannot do it because of this. We have to really say, "Let's give it a try." "Let's do this." "Let's try this." We have to be more aggressive or more assertive, perhaps, with our dreams in this country. Because, again, this country is a dream, as funny as it may sound. I told a mom the other day who called me from a school, I said, "We need to expose kids to their culture because this is a country of dreams." I reminded the lady—she was a Caucasian—and said, "We Latinos still see this country as the land of dreams. We can make things happen." We can make things happen, but we have to overcome our own kind of inferiority complex or whatever, our mental approach to things.

**LD:** I have one more question and, then, I'd like to ask you if you have anything else you'd like to talk about. What are the things that give you the most satisfaction, things that you've accomplished or that your community has accomplished?

**EC:** I think I have to go back to my education at Saint Thomas. I have to be very grateful for the many people that helped me to get my master's in theology, and, also, the daily people that reaffirm and support me with saying, "You are doing good things. You are helping your people."

Of course, I got lucky to marry to a great woman [Gale Perrie Mason] a great mom of my kids, and have a family. It's the best thing in life.

The flexibility that I have - I'm in a position where when my mom died just a month ago, I was able to get a ticket and go on an airplane and fly down and see my mom. I live a life of a king. It's a beautiful thing.

Accomplishing this status, this life, it's not an easy thing in many ways, but, also, I never give up. I never give up. I could have given up on education. I could have given up about finishing the master's. I could have given up on many things, but I never did that. So the whole perseverance, it's very much a part of us as a culture, and, maybe because I saw the sacrifices that my parents also made when we were growing up, again, as I tell people, supporting our family with five kids with seventy, eighty cents a day. And here I am, I make more than that and I live better than that, why not feel proud of how far we have come? Also, saving my life from the war in Guatemala, I think maybe it's one of the smartest decisions I made, to get out of the country.

And coming to this great state of Minnesota, definitely, it's a great stop. As I mentioned to you before, I could have gone to California or could have gone to the east coast, but I stayed in Minnesota. I'm proud to do so. I never regret the decision. I think about those possibilities in those days, especially when I could have gone anywhere, but I stayed in Minnesota and I'm proud of that.

I'm happy and proud to be in this position here on campus, too, where I see many young people coming and going. Also, I hope my words of encouragement or wisdom hopefully, they wake up one day and say, "Oh, yes, I was told that I could accomplish the thing. I was told that I am smart. I was told I am good. I was told that I could do good." I think when I look back, it's the great people that told me that I could do good, that I did do better.

Again, that's the other thing about this great country of the United States, is you always feel like what I have accomplished, maybe it's not enough. You always think like there's more to accomplish.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** As I mentioned to you about a Ph.D., what is that supposed to do? If it's for my own satisfaction maybe, but would it change my life? I think I am doing what I'm supposed to be doing. We can always say, "We could have done that. We could have done this." Again, the drive that we feel in this country that we need to conquer the world is, sometimes, a little bit too much. I think we should be happy what God has given us, a great place to live, a great home to go to. We have enough food. We have a place to sleep.

One of my students the other day, we were having lunch here on campus, and he asked me—we were sitting there having this great lunch—"How are you? How is your life?" I said to him, "Just having this great lunch in front of me, this is a great life." Today, many of our brothers and sisters in Latin America don't have a lunch. Maybe they didn't have breakfast.

**LD:** Yes. Yes.

**EC:** So, yes, we can always say, as we always joke about, “I could buy the bigger car in the neighborhood or could have a big boat. I could have this and that.”

I think I’m proud of how far I have come and I have accomplished things. I have not had to give up on dreams and I can help other younger people to dream and to accomplish their dreams. It’s very important for our culture as Latinos, for my community as Guatemalans. I still organize events for them, picnics or we have the Festival of Nations, just to remind kids of the language, the traditions, and to come together.

When my mom died, weeks after, one of the Guatemalan ladies called some other Guatemalans. We got together just to chat about my mom and have some food and jokes and those kinds of things. So that’s the beauty about our community and the beauty about living in a country such as this or in the State of Minnesota.

There a lot of good things that I think I could claim as accomplishments. Still, I dream about some other things, but this is good. This is a good life.

**LD:** One more question . . . [Laughter]

**EC:** Yes.

**LD:** What are some of those dreams that you dream of for yourself, for your sons, for your community here in Minnesota, for Guatemala?

**EC:** Well, again, this is the capitalist in me. Since I became a good Americano . . .

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**EC:** Sometimes you wish to have this millions of dollars and establish scholarships for Latino kids. I mean that sounds kind of sad but it’s true. I would do that. Also, I would like to buy a location and establish *La Casa Guatemala Cultural* or a house for arts and exhibitions of Guatemala. Exactly. So you wish, you dream about those things. Every time I read in the paper there’s a big house or a mansion for sale, I think, oh, man, I wish I had the money to just buy that and have a cultural center for Guatemalans or for Latinos and those kinds of things. Again, I dream about, if I should become a millionaire one day, to build a house with a Mayan sign, like a community center for instance, and call it Maya Pan-American Cultural Center or something so all Latinos could go in and display their culture, their language, their traditions. There’s a lot of dreams that I could... Still, also, I wish I could have money to buy a farm and invite Latinos to

go and plant flowers or vegetables and just reminisce those days back home where you can just go to a piece of land and stand there and you claim it's your land.

Yes, I dream about having a bigger house, especially with the boys growing.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**EC:** But I think I live in a huge house, and I live in a very nice neighborhood in Roseville, which is, again, a very privileged life I live and giving my kids the best education. The schools in Roseville are the best.

Going back to the dreams . . . Definitely, I dream that if my Teodoro, if he wants to be a doctor, well, he should go to the best schools in this country. If he wants to go to Yale or Harvard or anywhere, I hope I will have the money to support him or hope he's smart enough to go. That kind of dreams, you know. The children should do better than parents, as we always think about it.

**LD:** What about dreams for the community here or back home in Guatemala?

**EC:** Once again, back home in Guatemala, there are so many things you can do. I wish, someday if I retire, to spend more time down there and help build parks, for instance, and build a basketball court or a tennis court or a soccer field. That's one thing I see when I visit my hometown, we don't have as many parks. That's the beauty about this state; it has so many parks, so many areas you can go. Down there, it could be just the lack of funds or the lack of land, but you don't see parks. You feel sorry for the kids, because they have nowhere to go. They play in the streets; that's a very common thing. If I should have some money one day, that's one thing I would like to do, have parks and tennis courts or basketball courts or volleyball, anything about sports. We need to help kids to think more positively and, again, try to give them other options, healthy options, to live a life and grow up healthy. That's one thing you hear about many youth in Latin America in general; many young people just don't know what to do with their lives, and also because of the lack of work.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** Unemployment is way high everywhere in Guatemala, especially. Many of the kids that have a great education, have great dreams, great expectations but there is no where to go. That's why they end up here. Sometimes, they get worse up here, instead of staying home or finding dreams those kinds of good things.

Yes, once again, I always think that money should be a solution, but, of course, money is not the solution of everything. I could still do volunteer work with this mission in my hometown, and, maybe, through fundraising or asking donors for money, so I don't have to be the millionaire. I could do the fundraising for many of the projects that I have in mind.

**LD:** Sure.

**EC:** I could do that. Also, I hope to do that one day here, on campus. Because of the politics and, also, policies you have to follow, I cannot just go to the Minneapolis Foundation and say, "Hey, I need ten scholarships for Latinos." It doesn't work that way. But I wish one day it should work that way, just go out to a foundation and say, "I need some scholarships for Latino kids." Definitely, we have Latino kids here that *really* could use a scholarship. We need to meet their needs.

**LD:** Sure.

**EC:** Also, we need to sensitize the institutions, in general, not just Augsburg College but all institutions, to think and be more flexible, more accessible to minorities and all other kids, too. Kids need to get a good education, a higher education.

**LD:** Yes. Do you have anything else you'd like to add? I'm pretty good on questions.

**EC:** Yes, I think we covered just about everything. We covered just about everything. I wish I had more data or statistics about Latinos who are teachers, who are doctors, who are this and who are that.

I praise, also, your job in the arts and theater and so on. I don't know if you know about Silvia Pontaza with Teatro del Pueblo.

**LD:** I know Teatro.

**EC:** She's from Guatemala, too. A lot of people like you have, also, incorporated into the mainstream things that, otherwise, wouldn't be there. We need to remind our institutions and, also, all aspects of the business this country has that we Latinos are here to stay. We're not going anywhere. We like it, too, you know.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** We like it. We always miss home and, often, as new immigrants—and it happens to you, I'm sure—sometimes, you feel like going back home, go back to El Salvador or Guatemala. We all say that same thing, but we never leave. [Laughter] We'll be here.

**LD:** Yes.

**EC:** Again, about the winter, the weather here, there's always so much to say. I like the four seasons, to be honest with you. I like the four seasons, definitely. Like today, a spring day, and it's a beautiful temperature and sunny sky. There are so many beautiful things in this life. One day shall be better than today. Right?

**LD:** I just want to thank you so much on behalf of the Minnesota Historical Society for taking the time out and for sharing your story with us and, ultimately, with the people of Minnesota. Thank you, Emiliano.

**EC:** Thank you.

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