

Gilbert de la O
Narrator

Lorena Duarte
Interviewer

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Minnesota Historical Society
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Gilbert de la O - **GD**
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

LD: Today is Monday, March 29, 2010. I am Lorena Duarte. I am conducting today's interview with Gilbert de la O. We are at the Minnesota Historical Society.

First of all, Gilbert, I want to say, officially on the record, thank you so much for being here and for agreeing to be interviewed.

GD: All right. Thank you. Thank you for having me and thank you for having the History Center do this.

LD: This is great.

First, can you tell us your name and spell it for us, please?

GD: Okay. My name is Gilbert de la O. People say De-luh-oh. They say Duh-lay-oh. But it's actually de la O. It's actually three words, my last name. It's lower case d-e with a space, l-a with a space, and then a capital O.

LD: Okay, great. You're from the West Side of Saint Paul?

GD: I've been here most of my life on the West Side. I was born in New Ulm, Minnesota. My parents were migrant workers. The New Ulm area was our base camp where we did the work when we came up from Texas, and, then, we went back to Texas after we were done. So I have brothers and sisters, and some of us born in New Ulm and others were born in Texas.

LD: What's your date of birth, please?

GD: August 26, 1945.

LD: I know that you're retired now.

GD: Yes.

LD: But what was your occupation before you retired?

GD: I worked for the Neighborhood House, which is a community center on Saint Paul's West Side. I actually started at the Neighborhood House as a participant. I started there in child care, and I stayed there till I was a teenager in the different programs. Then I went away for the service, came back, did different types of jobs, went to college, and, eventually, I landed a job at the Neighborhood House in 1972 and have been there ever since. I actually believe that, with my participation and my work, I've been associated with the Neighborhood House for over fifty some years.

LD: Wow, that's remarkable.

GD: Yes. I'd like to tell a story that I tell folks a lot about my involvement with the Neighborhood House.

LD: Sure.

GD: My parents enrolled me at the Neighborhood House child care center, and I have the distinction of being its only runaway.

LD: [Laughter]

GD: When I was five years old, I ran away from the child care center. I didn't want to stay there. As I left and started wandering the neighborhood . . . I lived in a neighborhood where everybody kind of knew one another.

LD: Sure.

GD: So somebody saw me wandering the neighborhood and took me home to my mother. My mother was waiting for me. She'd gotten notice, a phone call from Neighborhood House, that I'd run away, so she was waiting for me with my favorite Roy Rogers belt.

LD: [Chuckles] Ohhh.

GD: She gave me a taste of leather.

LD: Oh, no!

GD: She said, "You'll never leave the Neighborhood House again." And it worked, because I stayed there for over fifty-some years.

LD: [Laughter] That was quite a lesson.

GD: Yes. Yes. The wrath of moms, man, you know. [Chuckles]

LD: Oh, my gosh. That's great.

All right. We're going to talk quite a bit, I think, about the Neighborhood House, but, first, I just kind of want to get a few more things. Are you married, single?

GD: I'm married to Joyce. I have two boys, Roman and Diego. They're both married and they have children. I have—oh, I'd better get this right—six grandchildren.

LD: Congratulations.

GD: Oh! and one great grandchild.

LD: Wow!

GD: Yes. She was just born in February.

LD: Congratulations.

GD: Thank you. Thank you.

LD: You're a *bisabuelo*?

GD: Yes. [Laughter]

LD: Let's go back just a little bit? You said that you were born in New Ulm. When did you move to the West Side more permanently, shall we say?

GD: I would say when I was probably one year old, probably about 1946.

LD: Your parents moved up here to work?

GD: Yes. As I said, we were migrant workers. We would leave Texas in April and stay till October, work in the fields of sugar beets, whatever it was. Then, we'd go back to Texas. The story of my family is pretty similar to a lot of Mexican Americans. They did that trip back and forth, back and forth, and, eventually, they found permanent employment. So then we didn't have to make that trip anymore. We stayed.

LD: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? They were born in Mexico?

GD: No. My grandparents were born in Mexico. They came during the revolution of 1910; they left Mexico at that time. My grandparents on my father's side were from Bustamante, which was in Nuevo León. They came to Texas and they set up shop. My father was born in Darwin, Texas, and my mother was born in a town called Ravenna. They met and eventually married, and then they started the migrant work.

My father, before he was married, had worked with my grandfather. They worked in the coal mines. They worked in the cotton fields. They did all that hard work. Like other stories of Mexican Americans, when they came to Minnesota, the word got back to my parents that there are some good jobs up here in Minnesota. Even though it's that backbreaking, stoop labor, they were getting paid more than what they were getting paid in the coal mines, so they came up and started making that trip.

LD: How many siblings do you have?

GD: I have three sisters and a brother. My brother was killed in 1960 in an auto accident, so, from then on, I have three sisters. It was interesting as I've talked over the years with my aunts and my uncles about our experience here. There was a movie called *Grapes of Wrath* with Henry Fonda.

LD: Yes.

GD: As they were making a trip on their way to California, they had this beat up truck with all kinds of stuff all over the place. My aunt would tell me stories about how they had one car and in that car would be my dad, his brother, my sister, my gram . . . all packed ready to go, and all the stuff on the outside. [Chuckles] So it kind of resembled that *Grapes of Wrath* kind of thing. They did that year in and year out.

LD: Were you youngest, oldest, in the middle?

GD: I'm the baby.

LD: You're the baby.

GD: Yes.

LD: Tell me about growing up on the West Side. What are your first memories of the old West Side?

GD: Wow. As I've looked back and thought about growing up on the West Side, the first thing I remember . . . The first thing I know, it's like that song in *Cheers*, a place where everybody knows your name. That's what it felt like to me. I grew up in a six-plex and in that six-plex lived my grandma, my grandpa, my aunt, and my uncle. Then across the street lived my godparents. On the other corner lived my cousins, so I kind of knew everybody and everybody that I knew had that same kind of relationship growing up, too.

LD: Sure.

GD: When you walked down the street, you either met someone of your own family or you met somebody of one of your friend's family. It was good; it was good, and sometimes, it wasn't so good, because when you're out messing around, the word got

back that, “I saw your son down the street, and he was doing whatever.” That kind of thing.

LD: Yes.

GD: The other thing is that we were always outside playing. We were always doing something with the neighbor kids. We were able to hang out. When we were little kids, when the streetlights came on, that was time to start coming back home, because it was starting to get dark.

What I remember of Sundays is when we went to church. My parents didn’t go to church, but they really encouraged all of us to go to church. Then Sunday morning after church we’d be coming back home, and the *comida* that my mom would be making and, then, it would be music. Then, the neighbor kids would be dancing and it almost seemed to me like a festival on Sundays.

LD: Which church was that?

GD: Our Lady of Guadalupe.

The other thing I remember a lot, too, about the West Side is the relationship that I think my parents developed with the business community. For an example, my parents were able to go to stores, get a whole bunch of groceries, and then charge them, and then wait till Friday when my dad got paid, and, then, go pay. When I think about that, there’s no way that I could go to Rainbow or Cub and say, “I’m going to pay you on Friday. What do you think?”

LD: Right, right.

GD: Or I could go to the store and just charge something. I would say, “Mr. Skolnick, my dad said he’ll pay you on Friday.” No problem. The same with haircuts. My dad would say, “Go see Ted.” Ted Guzman was the community barber. I’d go. All my friends did the same thing. “Ted, my dad said he’d pay you on Friday.” No problem. What I got out of that was that what my dad was giving was his word and that meant so much. When I give you my word, when I say I’m going to do something, I’m going to do it. I think that’s kind of helped me through my life, too. Giving your word is *so* important. I thought that was real interesting, again, when I look back on that.

The other thing that was real important, too, Lorena, when we talk about relationships, was that we grew up around a Jewish community. There were maybe seven or eight Jewish synagogues that were there. The Jewish folks had been there on the West Side before us, before our influx of Mexican Americans started coming. Just being able to go to school with some of the Jewish kids and get involved with their culture was great, and they’d get involved with our culture. One of the things is that in a Jewish community, they have a mezuzah. It’s a little thing that they put on the doors to kind of bring good luck and all that. They shared . . . we had one of those at our house.

On holidays, the Jewish folks would always give my dad a bottle of Mogen David wine. The kids would come over for tamales and tortillas. It was just that interaction going on. Back in 1997, I was able to see all the pictures of what the houses looked like back then. I was just amazed. I mean, it was a ghetto.

LD: How so?

GD: It was tar paper houses. There was no grass. But, you know, growing up during that time, you didn't even think about that. As I was looking through that, I thought of a quote that Doctor Martin Luther King had said, "We may have come on different ships, but we're all in the same boat now." That's what I felt as I looked back on it. We were all in the same boat.

LD: It was a largely immigrant community, right?

GD: Right.

LD: You're talking a little bit about your interaction with the Jewish community. What was your interaction like with other communities?

GD: The only communities when I was growing up down there were some African Americans, black folks, and some Lebanese, but there weren't a lot of them. The thing that stood out for me as a kid down there was that they had a church, and there was gospel music. We used to sneak in there, look in the windows and watch them jam, you know, singing and playing instruments. That was really interesting for us, too. There weren't a lot of families, but the families that were there, at least we played sports with the kids. We went to school with them. There didn't seem to be any of that, well, discrimination. I'm black. I'm Chicano. I'm Jewish.. All that kind of stuff, it wasn't happening back then, not on the West Side. I met a Japanese family and that was probably the only other family that I remember of Japanese descent, other than Frankie Hijikata, who was in charge of the Neighborhood House. There were some Native Americans there, but most of the folks that I interacted with were Mexican Americans. One Puerto Rican family was there, the Lopez family, but it wasn't until later on, I think, that we got more coming in.

LD: You're saying really within the West Side, there was very little tension. Were there tensions with folks outside of the West Side?

GD: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LD: Tell me about it.

GD: Where the West Side is now, up in that area, that used to be called the *lomas*, the hills. That's where a lot of white people lived. When you went further up, then it was West Saint Paul. Growing up and watching my brother and his group of guys, they were

always being hassled by the white kids up there. So that's where the tension was. There was always little turf wars that were going on. It wasn't until I went to Roosevelt Elementary School and Humboldt High School that I started talking with folks, kids that lived up in those upper West Side areas, as they called it. What separated our communities from the *lomas* to the flats was this bridge. It was a big, black bridge and we called it the Black Bridge. [Laughter]

It's interesting how people that we talked to would say that when they went for a ride on Sundays or Saturday afternoons, they'd come to the Black Bridge. The parents would stop the car and say, "Okay, now, make sure you lock your doors, because now we're going down to the flats." Again, they called us "the flats." We were called "Jew Town." We were called "The Pollock Flats," because there was a big Polish community that was there. In the community, there wasn't any of the racial strife. When we got outside the community, it was there.

LD: I was reading through some of your bio [biography] and in some of the material that I went through to prepare for this, you kind of talked about how that strife made you act out a bit as a kid. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

GD: Again, I did not realize that at that time, but, now, when I reflect back on things I realize that when we were growing up, other than inside our family, there wasn't a lot of reinforcement that being a Mexican American was something to be proud of and to hang your hat on. The books that we used in school . . . When I've talked to my friends, we've talked about when we were growing up, you always saw *Father Knows Best* and who was the gardener? His name was Frank, a Mexican, you know.

The same with a Pepino in the *Real McCoys*. Again, as you saw once in Hollywood, we were always the gardener or the *bandido*. Even prior to even that, though—my brothers and sisters, they went to school before me—there was some punishment, even corporal punishment for speaking Spanish.

LD: [Gasps] Tell me about that.

GD: Oh, yes.

LD: What schools?

GD: Lafayette, in particular. That was our first point of entry for education. Lafayette was a K [Kindergarten] through, I think it must have been sixth grade then at that time. There was Miss Aplee who was the principal, and if you spoke Spanish there in the classroom, you were sent to the office to Miss Aplee said, "Put your hands out," and she'd give them a little rap on the fingers with a ruler. So that was one thing.

The other thing was, again, when I was able to reflect back on this, that the teachers couldn't pronounce our names. Rodolfo, Gilberto. They couldn't say those, so they Anglicized the names and gave us different names. My sister Enriqueta became

Henrietta, or she became Kathy. It was just amazing how they came up with some of these names. My brother Rodolfo they called Roy, or they called him Rudy.

There was a school called Crowley that was located outside the West Side, but it was still considered the West Side - it was outside the flats area. Crowley was a school for slow learners. We learned later on that it was for slow learners. Folks, at that time, used the term mental retardation. They'd also send you there if you couldn't speak English. So a *lot* of kids went there, and, eventually, they dropped out because of the stereotype, you know.

LD: Sure, yes.

GD: So when it was my turn to come, my parents insisted, said, "You've got to be speaking English." It was interesting. One of my younger sisters and I were raised speaking English almost all the time, speaking English to my parents and my parents speaking Spanish to us. I see that going on today in the new communities that are coming here, like the Asian community, where the kids are the ones who are helping the parents understand the English language and, sometimes, helping to be the translator or the interpreter and those kinds of things. That was my experience, too. Going to school then, we went there speaking English and our parents speaking Spanish to us at home.

The other thing that *really* sticks out to me as I reflected back on this, was that in elementary school, they would have the food groups up on the wall. If you're a good American this is what we eat for breakfast, lunch, and supper: the wheat, the produce . . . all that kind of thing. When you look back, there were no tortillas up there.

LD: [Laughter]

GD: That's what we had, you know. We had tortillas, frijoles, all that kind of thing. Again, as I look back, there was a lot of stuff up there telling us about our culture that's not acceptable. What's really amazing today, within the last ten years, I would say, is this big *explosion* of Mexican food. They're saying now, "Eat this." In fact, they don't call them tortillas; they call them wraps.

LD: [Laughter]

GD: That's supposed to be more healthy for you. It's interesting. Now, even *chile*, they talk about the fact that it has Vitamin A and all those kinds of things. Yet what's interesting about the stuff that was up there, the cheeses and the milk, is that now they're saying, "Hey, that's not good for you, man."

LD: Right, right.

GD: It's interesting, you know.

LD: What I'm getting is that there was a real sense of division or isolation culturally when you were in the majority culture.

GD: Yes.

LD: Do you think that then kind of led to frustration? Maybe you can speak to some of the challenges that you faced as a youth and that you saw that other youth on the West Side faced.

GD: Again, I think, Lorena, what happened—I speak for myself, but I know that it happened with my partners that I ran with—is that you develop kind of a sense of inferiority, that you're not like everybody else, that you're not accepted, you're not like the white folks. Everything around you is what you see on TV. It's kind of like, well, if you're not like that, if that's the norm, we're not the norm. What we did, and what I saw that my brother and his guys did, too, is that we became tough guys. We said, you can make fun of us. You can call us names. You can call us spics and all that, but you know what? We're going to kick your ass, man—and that's what we did. In junior high and high school, that scene followed me all the way up. It seemed that teachers always favored the kids that carried all the books and homework after school, the ones that raised their hand, all that kind of stuff. So, for me, my—what's the word I'm looking for?—equalizer was, okay, I may not be as smart as you, but I'll beat your butt, man. That's the kind of respect that I was getting and my friends got. We're tough guys.

What's interesting then is what happened as we started going into junior high and high school, and as we interacted with the mainstream there. I don't know if it was because of what the kids heard at home about us, but they found out that whatever they heard at home, once they actually met us, they figured they're not such bad guys. The chicks liked us, maybe because we were the forbidden fruit.

LD: [Laughter]

GD: They came to us.

LD: So it was really more with the parents?

GD: Right, yes, oh, yes. If you dated an Anglo girl, there was no way that you could walk her home. You had to meet her two blocks away or whatever, or I'll meet you down at the Neighborhood House or I'll meet you . . . You could never go home. Again, you kind of stick out your chest and say, "I don't give a shit," but you really did. That's how I coped. Let me . . . can I tell . . . ?

LD: Of course. Yes, yes.

GD: During this time, I kind of believed that, okay, I'm not good at schoolwork, and that kind of thing. So that followed me all the way through. When I was in tenth grade I was in typing class. I couldn't get it going. I felt my fingers were too slow. Anyway, I'd act

out. I'd throw the typewriter down on the ground. I'd rip the ribbons and all that kind of stuff just for an excuse. Everybody was going really fast. They're going quicker, man, and I'm just going really slow. So feeling bad about that, I had to come up with something so I can show that it's not me; it's the machine or something.

Anyway, I was a sophomore and it came to Christmas break. Just before Christmas break, the instructor came to me and said, "You know, when we come back after break, I don't want you in my classroom. I don't care where you go. If you want to go home, I don't care. You'll still get a credit, but I don't want you to come back to my class." That class I had from two to three. So I'm not going to class. I'm out at two o'clock and all my other friends had to stay till three. When I found that out, I went to my friends . . . There was a group of us that hung out all the time. I went to them and said, "Hey, guess what? I get to get out at two o'clock." They said, "Oh, man! you're getting over on them, man." I said, "Oh, yes, I'm getting over, man." Right? So that followed me. That must have been like 1960 or something.

Now, in the early 1970s, I enrolled at the University of Minnesota. I'm sitting in class, and one of the first things we had to do was read and then write a composition paper, fifteen pages. That was before computers, so you had to type. The instructor was saying, "You've got to do this." Then I thought, oh, man, I've got to type this. I started doing this and, then, it dawned on me that I really didn't get over when I think back on that. I didn't get over. The teacher got over because he didn't have to deal with me anymore.

LD: Right.

GD: I didn't get over, man. I didn't learn how to type.

LD: Wow.

GD: That was the first year. I think it was quarters that we did back then instead of semesters. Anyway, I really enjoyed what I was doing at college. All of a sudden, I'm learning and I really enjoyed that, and I'm thinking, man . . . I can go back and realize what did this to me; it made me hunger to learn. In my third quarter at the University, I made the dean's list.

LD: Wow! Let's go back to that. What was that thing? What was that trigger? What was the thing that made you yearn to learn, to change maybe from a kid that was acting out to a kid that actually enjoyed being there and got on the dean's list?

GD: I look back on that, and it was my involvement with the Chicano Movement. The Chicano Movement with the Brown Berets gave me a sense of pride. It gave me a sense of belonging. We started the Brown Berets, and the Chicano Movement started.

LD: I'm sorry. How did that start? Was that still in high school or was that after high school?

GD: After school. After I got out of the service in 1968, it seemed that the late 1960s was a great time to be growing up. It was a time of all the groups, the Black Panthers, the women's movement, the Indian movement, the hippie movement. It was just a great time. Flower power. It seemed like there was just something in the air that was connecting all us folks.

We were reading and hearing about the Chicano Movement going on, and it was important for those of us who grew up without some kind of identity like that. Amongst ourselves, we had our own identity. We called ourselves the WSPB, the West Side Party Boys. That followed us all the way through. Then, we became the Latin Counts. Then, I went in the service. When I came back out, that's when that national movement started.

One day, a bunch of us guys were sitting around and we heard about Reies Lopez Tijerina, when he raided the courthouse down in Arizona looking for some kind of land-grants that he said were owed to the Mexican people. He went in there with Brown Berets. All of a sudden, this whole thing about being who you are and what you're all about . . . Initially, for me and some of our guys, we said, "All right. Okay, let's be Brown Berets now. We were the West Side Party Boys. We were the Latin Counts." So we started it without really a goal in mind. As we start getting involved and realizing what this thing was all about, about identity, about equality when you look back on education, this whole business, this is what we ought to be doing. This is what it is about.

As we started the Brown Beret Movement on the West Side, on campus there was a movement called the Latin Liberation Front. We kind of had a relationship with some of the folks in the Latin Liberation Front. So we started doing things together. Eventually, the talk was about starting a Chicano Studies Department at the University of Minnesota.

LD: Right.

GD: That's how all that thing came about. I wasn't in college then. I was just hanging around with the Berets and doing the thing in the community. The University community brought in Alfredo Gonzalez to be the first instructor and chair of the Chicano Studies Department. I enrolled in Chicano Studies there at the University, and had Alfredo as my instructor. I am pleased that I was able to tell him years ago that he was my impetus. He was the one man that inspired me. I was like a little kid in a candy store when he started talking about the Aztecas and Chichen Itza and about the *chocolate*, how we fed the world, our ancestors, and all this information. I was like a little kid in a candy store with my mouth wide open saying, "Come on, man, keep giving it to me."

What that did for me, Lorena, over the years as I started reading . . . I had pride about what my family was. What it did for me . . . I start telling folks all the time without any disrespect, "You know what? After being there, I can walk shoulder to shoulder with white people. I don't have to walk behind them. I don't have to walk in front of them. I can walk side by side. You know what? My culture, my ancestors, man, we did a lot to build America."

LD: Right.

GD: We did a lot. That's what just got me going then, that kind of thing. And then you want to pass this on to the young people so that they may get this pride. You don't have to be a thug. You don't have to be a trouble maker, man—unless you want to—because there's some pride out there in who we are.

LD: Right. I want to get to that, kind of telling the younger generation, and your mentoring through Neighborhood House. But, before that, I wanted to touch briefly on your service. When did you go in?

GD: I went in February 1964.

LD: You enlisted?

GD: Yes, and then I got out in December 1966.

LD: You served in Vietnam?

GD: Yes, for one year. I was wounded when I was there, too. I served with the First Infantry Division. That was another thing for me. In 1963—I think it was 1963 when I graduated—as kids were preparing to go on to college and all that kind of stuff, I went to jail. We did a drive-by shooting. This thing that we talked about earlier is that outside the community there was the discrimination. Well, what happened was there was a group of guys, a gang of guys and girls, that lived up in West Saint Paul and they'd come down and call us spics. So we were fighting all the time. One time, it got to this thing where, unfortunately, some of us had pistols, and when they came down and started all over again, we went back up there and got them. Unfortunately, it was a big blowout. Four people were shot. Bullets went in other homes. We were under age. I think I still have some paper clippings that my mother saved. I mean the communities wanted to try us as adults. Why did this happen? It shouldn't have happened. And the place that came and gave us the biggest support was the Neighborhood House.

LD: Wow.

GD: The Neighborhood House sent social workers to meet us at the jail, to meet with our parents. What I remember is that it wasn't about guilty or not guilty from the Neighborhood House. What can we do to help them?

LD: That's remarkable.

GD: Yes. Then, the Neighborhood House held meetings in the community to find out what happened. How can we stop it from ever happening again? That was another thing that occurred to me. Here, kids are going to college, some are going to work, and I'm going to jail.

LD: So after that, then you enlisted?

GD: Yes, then I enlisted. I went in the Army.

LD: What was that like going from being incarcerated to going to war?

GD: Do you know one of the things that the Army did for me? As I was growing up, as you go to school, and you do different things, there was order in my life. So when they said, "Okay, everybody, you're going to get these things. This is your equipment. This is your rifle," all that kind of stuff . . . When I gave them my name, "Oh, yes, we've got it here." They'd check it off. It seemed like everywhere I went, I was squared away. Do you know what I mean?

LD: Yes.

GD: In school, sometimes, they'd forget to put my name on the list. I can't go here. I can't go there because my name wasn't on this list. But, here, everything that the Army said was going to happen happened. What I think I really liked about that was that order. I guess I had the feeling like I was somebody. You didn't forget me, man.

LD: Sure. Yes, yes.

GD: When I get shipped off and they count off the names, your name is on that clipboard. I think that's one of the things that I felt good about. You know, Vietnam wasn't happening then. When it did happen, though, I couldn't wait to go to Vietnam. Again, growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, I grew up with all these war movies, John Wayne, Errol Flynn. I wanted to do my part. People in my community, like my godfather's son, fought in the Army. My early football coach when I was a little kid playing football for the Neighborhood House, Al Monita, lost an eye in Korea, and, now, he's a football coach. All around me were veterans who did their part. It seemed like that was kind of a thing that might have been an equalizer, too. You know what? I'm going to go fight for America, so when I come home, they've got to treat me right. The other thing, too, I think it was like an expectation that that's what you had to do. If you're living in America, when you turn eighteen, you go to Selective Service. You sign up for the draft. If you go, you go. That's what you had to do.

Anyway, when the war came, I remember I got orders to go to Vietnam. I'm home on leave for thirty days. While I'm home during these thirty days, the war is on TV. We're killing a lot of enemy and I'm thinking, oh, man, I hope we don't kill enough where they're not going to send me over there because I want to go over, right? I was a hawk. I was a real hawk, man. I wanted to do that.

Anyway, the time comes and I go over there. One of the first battles I was in . . . I never, *never* . . . It never even dawned on me that the enemy is going to shoot back. That's how naive I was, I guess. Again, I believed what they were telling me, that we're superior. It's going to take ten, fifteen enemy guys to equal one American G.I., that kind of stuff.

We're superior. I never even thought about that. So in that first firefight I got into, now, they're fighting, oh, my God! Holy Smokes! Anyway, that happened. I was there for a year. I got out of there in 1966, out of Vietnam.

Then in 1970 or 1971, I was at a workshop at Macalester College, and they bring in this author. Her name is Gloria Emerson. She wrote a book, *Winners and Losers*. Now, she's talking about the war. She also brought with her a film that was called *Hearts and Minds*. In this documentary . . . Again, up until 1974, man, whenever I saw that, I was still a hawk. We've got to fight for America. In this *Hearts and Minds* documentary, there was a part of it where they were interviewing a Vietnamese fellow. His daughter had just been killed by one of our bombs. So through an interpreter, he's bawling and crying and he's saying, "My little girl, she's dead. I'm not ever going to see her grow up. I'm not going to see her ride a bicycle," all these kinds of things. It dawned on me and I'm thinking, wait a minute. At that time, I'm married and I have a little kid. I start thinking that this guy has the same feelings that I would have if that happened to my son. From that day on, I started looking at the war and my involvement a whole lot differently. I started reading, and got into the University of Minnesota. It took all that time, but I'm a proponent of the view that wars are no good.

LD: Yes.

GD: There's too much, as they call it, collateral damage. So that's how I raise my children, and how I advocate. If the enemy comes to Minnesota, comes to the West Side, definitely, you're picking up arms. I'll be there, too, but I'm not going over to some other country. I look back and remember when I was able to go on pass in Saigon, after coming off the field, and seeing Coca Cola, Esso Oil, Bank of California. It's like, wait a minute. We're defending these folks, man?

LD: Right.

GD: That changed my whole attitude about the war.

LD: Wow. Let's go back now to post-Vietnam. You're back. You've involved with the Brown Berets. Then, you go into school? Now, all this time, have you been involved with the Neighborhood House? I know that you were a participant as a kid. When did you start working for the Neighborhood House?

GD: When we had the Brown Berets, in 1970, the United Way had told the Neighborhood House that they can no longer do sports, and sports was the thing that, in my opinion, was the glue that held the community together. Anything you did sports-wise, you did at the Neighborhood House. So, in 1970 the United Way told the Neighborhood House they had to get out of sports and leave it up to the recreation centers. At that time, we had the Brown Berets. The word got to us that someone's got to take over. We can't let the sports die. So there was a group of guys that was going to start doing sports. They came to the Brown Berets looking for money, looking for fundraising, and so we did a big fundraiser to help raise some money to buy equipment and all that

kind of stuff. So that was kind of like my first entrance back to the Neighborhood House. Even though I wasn't working at that time, we helped with the fundraiser to do those kinds of things.

I think there was another significant thing for me, though, with the Brown Berets, Lorena. When we started on the West Side, the older generation, like my father, that first generation of Mexican Americans in Minnesota, they were skeptical. They were leery of us. I think, again, they saw us as being another gang. But more important, they saw us, as my dad did—we got this straightened out later on—as kind of disrespectful. We'd challenge. We challenged the police. We challenged education. We did all that. My parents and that first generation, that's not in their makeup.

LD: Right.

GD: It was like to get along, you go along. You didn't question; you just did it. We were the ones questioning. Now, this is two years into the Brown Berets, and my dad was still kind of skeptical.

Then, in 1972, the packing house closed its doors. Swift's and Amour started closing the doors. That packing house was the reason that people in that generation were able to get off the migrant stream, were able to find employment. That was like a godsend to that generation at Swift's. Even though it was hard labor, if you worked hard, there was bonus money. They called it "b's". You always got a little "b" money, that little extra. Swift's had a credit union. You could go to the credit union and get your house. You could get your car. In my case, they were able to get lawyers for me when I was messing up. That was their livelihood, man. That was their golden cap. Then, that bubble burst. That bubble burst in 1970 when they closed it. I remember this vividly, the day Swift's closed. The Cozy Bar was just packed with men. [Chuckles] That was probably one of the first times that I've seen that generation of men forlorn, with tears, crying in their beer. They had been there all their lives. My dad had a third grade education. My dad, like other Mexican American guys, Lorena, he was that kind of guy, again, who gave his word and gave an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. They busted their ass, so now what are they going to do?

As months went on, my father had to go look for a job, and of course I went with him to help him fill out those applications. I went with my father and a couple of other guys. We'd take them all over to a place to fill in an application. Two things happened during that time. One thing, I was able to start a real good dialog with my dad and his friends, and just started talking about things in general. For an example, as we talked about Swift's, I asked, "Dad, how many Mexican Americans were in supervisory positions?" "None."

LD: Right.

GD: "How many were union heads?" "None." "Look how hard you guys worked."

Now, we're going to the different employment places, and they got into that syndrome where after you fill out the application, they go down and sit with somebody, and they'll say, "Well, okay, Manuel. It looks pretty good here. We'll give you a call. Don't call us. We'll call you." So after awhile it was just breaking my heart to know that they were judging my dad from his application. Third grade education. Was at Swift's. If we went to one place, we went to twenty-five places. Finally, at one place . . . it was Plastics Incorporated. I remember after we did this and the same thing happened, "Don't call us," that kind of thing, my dad and the rest of them went to the car, I went back in there. I told the guy, "Hey, listen, I'm going to tell you something about my dad." I gave him that rap, "My dad's a hard worker. Just give him a chance. Give him a chance." I have to commend Plastics Incorporated; they gave him a chance.

LD: Wow.

GD: He went in there, and he was able to retire from there.

LD: Okay.

GD: What was interesting about my dad was that when he got the job—he was a janitor—got there right on time, well, not right on time. My dad always believed if you've got to go somewhere, you've got to be at least fifteen minutes early for sure, or a half hour. He was always early all the time. He was just like that. My dad started working, and he was fast. He did all his work. One day, he comes home and tells me that his boss comes up to him, and I said, "Oh, Dad, what's going on?" He said, "He really likes my work. He really likes what I'm doing, but I'm doing it too quick."

LD: [Laughter]

GD: I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "He said, 'Manuel, this is an eight-hour shift.'" My dad said, "Yes, but I can . . ." He said, "Yes, but here's what you've got to do. You've got to extend . . . All that work that you do, make that into an eight-hour day." So my dad, he felt bad about that, because now he's thinking that he's cheating the place. He can get that work done. Those are some fond memories that I have about that time.

LD: It was a different generation.

GD: Oh, yes. Yes, right. I'm sorry, I keep going back. You asked me a question.

LD: No, no, this is good. It's your story. What's beautiful about your story is that it really incorporates the story of the neighborhood. I get this very clear image of all these men at the bar crying into their beer.

GD: Oh, yes.

LD: After this, you went into the University. Were you working at the Neighborhood House at the time that you were studying?

GD: Actually, I first went to Lakewood Junior College. I think it's called Century College now. I went there, first. While I was at Century College, Frankie [Franklin] Hijikata, who was the director there at the Neighborhood House since 1957—he was the new one—called me and wanted to talk to me.

Oh, first of all, when the Brown Berets were doing our thing on the West Side, he sent a worker from the Neighborhood House to come to our headquarters—we had a little building for our headquarters—to find out who we were. The worker that came was a friend. Her father and my father worked together, so Frank said, “Kathy Young, why don't you go because your dad knows his dad. I know they're not going to hurt you.” [Laughter]

LD: You guys had a real reputation.

GD: Oh, yes, absolutely. Absolutely. She came. She told me that's what Frank had said. Anyway, we talked, and he got a better feel of what we were about. Then, two years later, a position opened up at the Neighborhood House in the Youth Department, and Frank asked me. At that time, I was at Lakewood. In 1972, I was working at a juvenile institution with young people.

I was kind of turning my life around then. That's when Frank offered me the job. But here's what's interesting. When I accepted the job, Frank received phone calls. He received letters saying, “Do you know who you've got there?” “Do you know who you hired?”

LD: Oh, my gosh.

GD: Yes, oh, yes.

LD: Did he stick up for you?

GD: He stuck up for me. Yes.

LD: What was your first position? In the Youth Department?

GD: In the Youth Department as a youth worker.

The very first day of my job, Lorena, the Brown Berets . . . I had kind of pulled away from them. Now, there's another Brown Beret group coming through. So I'd kind of pulled away from them, but I was still involved on the periphery. They were planning a gathering in what was called People's Park, right across from the Neighborhood House.

They're having a gathering there. There were wives and guys and all that. The police came and they had a big fight there with the police. I'm across the street seeing this. Boom! I'm thinking oh, my god. What's going on, man? I get over there, and now the

cops are grabbing and putting people in the squad cars and all that kind of thing. I'm going around saying, "Hey, what's going on?" talking to the police and all that. After the thing happened, I went back to the Neighborhood House and talked with Frank. I said, "Frank, listen, I feel really bad because, you know, I should be in there. I should be in there fighting. I'm here on the periphery. They're going to think I'm chicken shit. I've lost who I was." It was interesting, because as we sat down, Frank said, "Okay. But, now, you're in a different role. You saw this happen. Now, what can you do about it?" And we started talking. What we decided that we would organize some folks. We went down to the police station. We took pictures of the guys that were beat up. We met with the mayor and said, "Look what's going on." We did it that way, you know.

LD: So the tables were turned?

GD: Yes.

LD: So you were the one that went to the jail and asked, "How can we help?"

GD: Right, right. Yes.

LD: Wow. That's incredible. In a very short amount of time, relatively speaking, because when that happened, the big bust up, in . . . When was it?

GD: That was in 1963.

LD: So in ten years, a lot of things had changed.

GD: Oh, yes. Another thing I tell, too, Lorena, is that during this period from when I got out of the war until I started going to college there was twenty-five of us guys. Now, you see twenty-five of us guys walking down the neighborhood with berets on and jackets and all that stuff. We were barred from every beer joint on the West Side because we were hellions and that kind of thing.

LD: [Chuckles]

GD: It might have been 1969 or early 1970 . . . Again, during the Brown Berets . . . and before we did this thing with the Neighborhood House, we got in this big ruckus at the Cozy Bar. The owner called the police and, now there's warrants out for our arrest. Now, I'm at home. It was on a Friday morning. There's pounding going on on the door. Boom, boom, boom, boom. I go down there, and it's police. They come up there and they're going to arrest me. I have a little baby. He's crying. My wife's crying. They've got the cuffs on me. They take me to the other room, and this cop tells me . . . I can't remember his name. I still can't. I've tried to. This cop pulled me into another room and said, "First of all, Gilbert, I've got to tell you this." If he's arrested me once, he's arrested me all during my adult life.

LD: [Chuckles]

GD: He said, “I need to tell you this, though. You never hassle me every time you get arrested. I need to tell you that. You never did that. You never hassled me.” He said, “I want to give you credit for that.” Then he told me, “Look at you. You’ve got a wife. You’ve got a kid. They’re bawling. You’ve got a big life ahead of you, man. What are you going to do? When are you going to change?” During that period of time in Saint Paul if you got arrested on a Friday, there was Saturday court, they called it. So you go to court on Saturday, and then you can get out on bail or whatever it was. So this cop told me, “Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m not going to arrest you. I’m going to trust you that tomorrow you’re going to turn yourself in on Saturday to the court.” That’s what I did. I didn’t get arrested, so I didn’t have to put up any bail money or any of that kind of stuff. At five o’clock in the morning on Saturday morning, I had to go to the police station, turn myself in, and then go to court at nine o’clock.

LD: Then what happened?

GD: I got out on O.R – my own recognizance. We worked out a deal with the owner and said, “This is what we’ll do. We’ll never come back to the Cozy again if you drop the charges.”

LD: Wow.

GD: That’s what happened.

LD: Was that kind of a turning point?

GD: It was. It was. Here’s a cop that took a chance on me. Here’s another one, you know.

LD: Yes.

GD: He didn’t arrest me. I thought, man, I can’t dog him. I gave him my word. I gave him my word that at five o’clock in the morning, I will go to the police station and turn myself in. Again, when I reflect back on this, *la palabra* . . . Again, it’s my dad saying, “You gave your word, man.” That was kind of the beginning of my turnaround. I was twenty-seven years old, twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, so it was about time.

LD: [Laughter] Then you went to work with the Neighborhood House?

GD: No. I went to college. Then, I went to the juvenile center working there, and, then, I came to the Neighborhood House.

LD: Had you finished college when you . . . ?

GD: No.

LD: So you continued studying while you worked at the Neighborhood House.

GD: Yes, I continued. Right.

LD: Tell me about the work that you did there.

GD: Oh . . . One of the things that the Neighborhood House, I would say, cut its teeth on was working with young people.

LD: What did you do day in and day out?

GD: One of the things we did at the Neighborhood House . . . They had a program called Youth Club Group Program. I had three groups of kids that I was assigned to. In each group, there were about eight to eleven kids. Some kids were good kids. They did what they were told, and other ones were like me.

LD: [Laughter]

GD: That was the deal. You develop a relationship with them. You did things like meet their parents. You went to the schools. You tried to keep them on the right track. Hopefully, they don't have to go to probation. Then, we got them involved with sports and became an advocate for them. When I got in trouble in school and my parents came to school, the teachers and the principal would say, "Yes, your kid is a problem" My ma would say, "Okay, fine," and then leave. Most of the time, they were right. But there were some times that some teachers just had it in for me and didn't give me that chance. So when I would explain that to my ma, my ma would say, "Well, no, these are the educators. Educators know."

LD: Not questioning?

GD: Right, right. That's one of the things that I saw as my role: to be an advocate for the kids in the school, which really caused consternation. I could go up to the school, to Humboldt, and say to the principal, "Your teacher is playing favorites." "We don't do that here." "Bullshit. When I was in class, your teacher played favorites."

LD: [Laughter]

GD: I would give him examples.

LD: Sure.

GD: Students would come to me and say, "Man, this teacher, he sits in the classroom and he just clips his nails. He does this or does that." So I'd go to the school. It got to a point early on in my career at the Neighborhood House where the Cherokee Heights PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] president said I was a thorn in their side because I wasn't being positive. When the Neighborhood House was being funded by the United Way, for

two years running, the staff at Cherokee and at Humboldt said that they weren't going to give any money to United Way because United Way gives to the Neighborhood House and the Neighborhood House pays my salary.

LD: Wow.

GD: Yes.

LD: How did the kids see you? How was your relationship with the kids? I imagine that some of them knew kind of your background being from the neighborhood. How did they react to that?

GD: I think the kids responded well. It was the parents. A lot of parents were kind of skeptical, because they knew of my history. It was interesting.

GD: The social worker at Cherokee Heights School approached me one day and said, "Hey, we have this kid. He's having some real problems. I'm wondering if you would come and visit with him, talk to him, and see what's going on." So I did that. I went up and he came and talked. It's the same thing, "My parents don't understand me." I saw him and I knew this kid is salvageable. There is no problem here, right? So I said, "John, let's work out some kind of contract," where I'd be glad to come and see him a couple times a week. If he fulfills the contract, we'll go on a field trip, take him to a baseball game. . . all that kind of thing.

Then I met with the mom. It was interesting when I started talking to the mom, she said, "Oh, are you the son of Ophelia?" I said, "Oh, yes." She said, "Oh, okay." I don't know the time period; it might have been a week. It might have just been a couple days when the social worker from Cherokee calls me up and says, "The mom doesn't want you involved with the kid." I said, "Oh. Okay, fine." Later I was talking with my mom, and I told her about the work, and I told her about this kid and the mom. My mom said, "Oh . . ." It turned out that this lady, when she would see my mom, she would say, "Oh, *pobre* Ophelia," talking about me, "It's too bad he gets in all this trouble. You're a good lady. He's just going to be in prison. He'll turn out to be no good." Now, her son is having some problems, you know?

LD: Wow.

GD: Yes. [Chuckles]

LD: So it was a real turn around there.

GD: Yes.

Lorena, I want to share another story about the work that I was doing working with young people at the Neighborhood House.

LD: Yes.

GD: Again, as a teenager at the Neighborhood House, I got in a lot of trouble, did this drive-by shooting. There was a social worker that the Neighborhood House hired. His name was Sonny Pierce. Anyway, Sonny developed a relationship with us and was a good guy, took us on field trips, did all that kind of stuff, did the kind of work that I eventually did. One day, one of our core guys was always messing around. He jacked around and he got in a jam. So, now, he's got to go to juvenile court. Because of his record, his probation officer is advocating for him to be put away to Totem Town [Saint Paul, Minnesota].

GD: We met with Sonny and said, "Sonny, listen man, you need to go with us to juvenile court. You need to tell the judge he can't put this guy away." We were trying to make a good story for him.

LD: Sure.

GD: Sonny said, "Well, you know, we gave him a chance, but look what he did. Look what's going on. I don't know if I feel comfortable enough doing that." I said, "Sonny, you *have* to, man. This is our partner." He said, "Well, I've got to give it some thought."

The next day, Sonny goes to court. Our friend gets sent up to Totem Town for six months.

When Sonny comes back, he said, "The judge, when he asked me, I had to tell him, 'I think it's about time that he needs to be put away because of what going on.' I know you guys don't like it, but I think in the long run, this is for the best." It's like how the *hell* can you do this, man? I thought you were our friend, that's how we felt about it." That night, we broke the windows of his car and sliced his tires.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

GD: So, now—I'm trying to think of the year—it was some time in the 1970s . . .

LD: Early 19y0s.

GD: I was two years into working with youth at the Neighborhood House. One of the guys I'm working with . . .when I came to a stop sign once he jumped out of the van and took off. I had to go and tell his mom, "Hey, we were coming home from the field trip and he took off." She said, "I don't know what's going on. He didn't come home."

Anyway, eventually, he had to go to court. So I'm telling his mom, "You know, Mom, I think he needs to be put away. He needs to know that there are some consequences for his action. "Yes, Gilbert," she said. I told her that this is what I'm going to advocate for. So we went to court. I did my little speech. The kid gets sent to Red Wing. Now, it didn't even dawn on me, Lorena, until later on that night when I'm talking with my wife. She

said, “Oh, do you see what you did? You did exactly what Sonny Pierce did.” I thought, oh, wow, absolutely. Absolutely.

LD: That’s coming full circle.

GD: Yes, I know.

LD: You didn’t get your tires slashed?

GD: No. [Laughter] No.

LD: Okay.

GD: Now when I look back on all this stuff in my life, I think that the qualities that I was pushing for myself when I worked with people was, first, I was genuine. I wasn’t a phony. I was respectful and I was honest. I think that’s what carried me through. It’s like what you see is what you get. I’ll be honest with you. Just like, thinking back, I did what Sonny Pierce did.

LD: But in the end, you feel that . . .

GD: Oh, absolutely. If I can tell you one story, I can tell a hundred stories about how this fellow is an adult, and now he’s coming with his kid to meet *me*. It’s kind of emotional, sometimes, for me.

LD: Tell me. What moves you about that work?

GD: Well, you know, sometimes you see kids with so much potential, and, then, for some reason, they don’t work up to their potential. They get in a jam. To have a kid come to me and tell his son, “Hey, this is Gilbert. This is the guy I’ve been talking about. If it wasn’t for him . . .” That kind of stuff.

LD: Yes, I see..

GD: That’s what makes it worth it. The pay wasn’t very good. [Laughter] But it was that kind of work, you know . . . to see that happen.

One time—another one—there was a family where the kid got in trouble in the summer. They were all smoking weed. It went on all summer. So, around August, I contacted the parents, and I said, “I just want to let you know, this is what I see happening, and I think we better nip it in the bud before school starts, because when school starts, it’s going to continue.” Some parents contacted me. One of the parents in particular told me, “It’s none of your business.” Okay? That’s what happens sometimes.

LD: Let me kind of shift just a little bit. You’ve seen the community change immensely. How many generations of de la O’s are there . . . ?

GD: Five.

LD: Five, now. In those five generations, you've seen the West Side change and grow, obviously, from the time before the floods. Tell me a little bit about that. What are some of the big changes that you've seen?

GD: I think the big changes have been in the complexity of the West Side. I almost said in the last ten years, but it's longer than that now—since probably since the 1980s, the late 1980s, when the Southeast Asian community moved in to our neighborhood. Then, after that, came more folks from Central America, and more folks from Mexico. That whole dynamic changed. As that was changing, some of the families that had been there generationally have moved off the West Side. They've moved elsewhere, so now it's like things starting all over again.

With the Southeast Asian community, the Hmong, I've had the privilege to interact with them. What I saw in them as I worked with that community is they reminded me so much of my grandparents and my parents - being the first generation here in Minnesota. They wanted the same thing for their kids that my parents and grandparents wanted - to work hard and make a better life for their family. They wanted the same thing. They wanted me, just like the Hmong wanted their kids, to be respectful. Even though, as I told you, I didn't listen to what my ma and dad were trying to put in me. Now, I finally got it.

LD: [Chuckles]

GD: Some people get it right away. Others wait till they're twenty-seven to get it. Others never get it.

LD: Yes.

GD: That's what I saw with the Hmong community, too. They had those same kinds of values, an honest day's work, all those kinds of things, and being respectful. Then, to see them be on the receiving end of discrimination and prejudice, that's the other thing. I think because I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with them that kind of really made me tight with them, as we say on the streets. In fact, the Hmong gave me a name. It's Xia Xiong, which literally means I have a good liver. [Laughter] But in their translation, it means about my heart, that I've got a good heart.

LD: Wow.

GD: I've been to Hmong marriages. I've been to funerals. I've been to births of babies of the families, so, yes, I've been included all over.

LD: Do you think that . . . You're talking about the discrimination they faced and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with them. Do you think the discrimination is still there? Is it as powerful? Is it different?

GD: You know, it's still there. I think it's almost like we're in a world right now—it's changing a little bit— where some people think that it's okay to be prejudiced.

When you see what's going on today, when the [President George W.] Bush Administration got in there, it looked like people lost their heart. We lost our compassion to help people. Now, former KKK [Ku Klux Klan] members [referring to Robert Byrd and David Duke] can openly run for Senate seats and things like that. Wow! What does that say?

LD: Right. Do you think things are worse or just different?

GD: About being worse . . . Unfortunately, the prejudice and the discrimination in the past held people down. Even though that's still out there, you can see that world has changed. We've made a lot of inroads. As you know, we're doctors. We're lawyers. We're judges. We're writing plays.

All those opportunities are there now. But, I think as a group, we still haven't moved forward. Even though we have kids going to college, we have people doing real good things individually, we haven't moved as a group, as a total group, as you see now with our dropout rate. Nationwide, we're thirty or forty percent of high school dropouts.

LD: When you say we haven't, do you mean the Latino community?

GD: Yes. Yes.

LD: Let's talk a little bit about that. Let's first talk about some of those inroads. What do you think have been some of the contributions of Latinos to the West Side or to Minnesota, in general?

GD: Again, we can point to individuals. I wish I could say, yes, you know now we've got a hundred Latinos who are school principals in Minnesota. The numbers aren't big, but we're there. Not only do we still go before the judge, we are the judge. [Laughter]

LD: Right.

GD: We're lawyers. I think in the arts community itself, this big explosion in the 1960s, the Chicano Movement, was an impetus for a lot of artists to come out. You see it on the West Side. You see it all over with the murals. I think, again, those artists still haven't gotten the recognition that they should have.

LD: Right.

GD: But now they work for COMPAS [Community Programs in the Arts]. They're writing plays. They're doing all kinds of different things now. So, I think in the artistic field, we're doing well. I think, now, you see us as lawyers, doctors. Nationwide, not only

are we still on the ground picking vegetables and that kind of stuff, but, now, we're up in the air as astronauts, too. I think we've really come a long way..

In all of that, too, one of the things that we still honor is our presence in America. I think you still see us really being patriotic. We're in the Iraqi War. We are the first ones to go sometimes, and we're the last ones to come out. We're still there. We still show that patriotism.

I think those are some of the contributions. I think there are a lot of folks that are making it. Valeria Silva is the first Latina superintendent of the Saint Paul Public Schools. We never had that before.

When Larry Lucio became principal at Humboldt, he was a home-grown guy from the West Side. When they went through that difficulty and got rid of him, the community rose . . . We had four hundred people at meetings fighting for Larry. The students walked out of Humboldt. Let me tell you that story.

In 1997, the St. Paul School Board was not going to renew the contract of Larry Lucio, who was principal of Humboldt School. This was a big disappointment to the community, because people felt Larry, who was born and bred on the West Side, and was the first Chicano/Mexican American principal in Minnesota, was doing an excellent job. A group of us organized to oppose this action by the School Board. Over 300 Humboldt students walked out of school (twice) and went to the School Administration Building to show their support for Larry. Over 100 parents held a rally in front of a school board member's home in support of Larry. On the night of the vote, 360 Colborne was packed inside and outside with more than 400 of Larry's supporters. Testimonials for Larry took over three hours to complete. Despite all that work, and the fact that we followed all the rules, made all the right contacts, and argued our case strongly - the Board voted not to renew Larry's contract.

That vote was a huge blow to the community. We had done everything right and yet the Board had chosen to ignore our argument and dismiss Larry despite all the community support he had. We decided that the only way to ensure this didn't happen again was to get our own community members on the School Board and in a position to influence the Board's policy. It all happened quickly. The DFL Convention was in May less than two weeks from the Board's decision on Larry. The community decided to nominate me for the School Board. We had very little time to organize, and the DFL convention was only a few days away. I needed to get DFL endorsement for my nomination as a School Board candidate, but I had practically no time to put anything together - like campaign signs, posters, a platform, etc.

As it turned out, there was a big school dance the night before the convention in the community. My supporters went to that dance with poster boards, magic markers, and crayons and told the students what I needed for tomorrow. So there they were alongside professionally done signs on the day of the convention - a lot of hand lettered signs supporting me all over the convention hall. The Danza Aztecas danced before I gave my

speech. It was “grass roots” organizing at its best. It worked, and I got the DFL endorsement. Later that year, when the city wide election was held, I was elected to the St. Paul School Board – the first Chicano/Mexican ever to serve in the 140 year history of the St. Paul Schools. It was a big step for the community. Three months into my school board tenure, the school superintendent and some key personnel in the Larry Lucio fiasco left the school district.

I think that’s one of the things - it was about being less invisible. In the last couple of Olympics . . . we had some boxers, and Dara Torres was one that swam last year. It just seems that when those people were participating in the Olympics, I remember in the community, people would say, “Hey, do you know so and so is going to be swimming tonight?” You get that pride when you see something, you know? We have this Oscar De La Hoya. Man, that has visibility in the community. I was fortunate enough to go to a lot of his fights—well not a lot of his fights, but at least five of his fights and be in that crowd of Latinos.

LD: Wow.

GD: Oh, man! It’s outstanding. And yet, when you look at us politically, they tell us we can make a difference, but even nationwide, we don’t all seem to go to the polls to make that difference.

LD: Right. That was going to be my next question. What are some of the challenges that face . . . again, locally here and maybe throughout the state or the nation? I am curious about locally. What do you think are the challenges?

GD: The challenge, I think, sometimes for locally is that we’re all kind of scattered now. If you look on a cultural scale, we have a lot of folks at this end who are still pretty much Spanish speakers, pretty much newly arrived. Then, at this other end, we have a bunch of folks who kind of are . . . the word I would say is assimilated, not acculturated, but assimilated now. Now, they’re living out in Hugo, Minnesota. They’re living in Wayzata. They want to make sure that they’re out there. Then, we’ve got some folks in here in the middle.

You know, we need a movement. We don’t have a national organization. I know there’s a National Council of La Raza. I think what’s happened, though, Lorena, is that there’s a feeling that the issue for us is immigration. Fix immigration and everything is going to be okay. Immigration is important, but we’ve still got kids in gangs. We’ve got kids on drugs. We’ve got kids dropping out of school. The focus hasn’t really been on that. It’s been on the other end. Somehow there’s got to be some kind of national movement to start looking at those kinds of issues. I thought for sure when that fellow out of New Mexico, Richardson . . .

LD: Bill Richardson.

GD: Yes. I thought that was going to be something there.

LD: What do you get the most satisfaction from in your work? Actually, if you can kind of take me through all that you did at the Neighborhood House, maybe that's a good way to start, kind of talking from your beginning years there. What did you do in your . . . gosh, how many years did you work there?

GD: Thirty-some years.

LD: In those thirty years, what did you do? What were your different positions?

GD: Actually, I worked in almost every department and supervised every department in the Neighborhood House from child care, to social services, to the youth, to volunteers. I did it all at one time. I think one of the things that I was able to do in all these different positions was, again, about developing relationships and being able to—I know this is not the right word, but I'm going to say it—educate. Folks in the community were seeing me interact with the Hmong, seeing me interact with the senior citizens, seeing me stepping up to the plate for different causes in the community. I think that gave them something to think about.

That's really been my thing. Folks have said to me, on the West Side, that I'm like the 911 person. If there's an issue, if there's a concern, call the Neighborhood House. I think that's been the history of the Neighborhood House. At the Neighborhood House, we do personify the neighbor in Neighborhood House. I think we are that neighbor. We need to be that neighbor. Kind of like when you grow up, and my ma needed some extra flour to make some tortillas or whatever it is, you go next door. So if people have an issue on the West Side or a concern . . . boom. That's the way it's really been for me.

Have I been successful doing that? Well, I've been okay at that. But if I've been successful, the reason I've been successful is because of my family. I've had a supportive wife who knows I've got to go here. I've got to go there. She grew up on the West Side, so she knows all my history, but also knows about the importance of the Neighborhood House and the work that I do. My work isn't always a twenty-four-hour-a-day job. Sometimes, it is. Sometimes it's been a seven days a week when people call me at my house. I don't mind that, and my wife has never minded that, and my children never minded that. Maybe the word is that I've been accessible, too. Even though I've been away for almost three years now, I still am.

LD: You still get the call?

GD: Oh, absolutely. Just, "Gilbert, what do you think I can do?" I can still point them in the right direction.

LD: You're still a resource?

GD: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I believe that.

LD: I just want to make sure that I've covered some of the points. What are some of the needs that need to be addressed? I know that we talked a little bit about going beyond immigration. What specifically would you like to see Latinos focus on locally?

GD: You know, I think it is education. A good education foundation is going to make your life a little bit easier. If you don't have a good education, life's just going to be a lot of frustrations. The thing is though, Lorena, the doors of opportunity have been opened. I want to believe that the movement, the Chicano Movement, opened up the doors and the door is getting wider and wider. But our folks aren't being prepared to take those opportunities. I think for some—again, not all, I can't paint them all with the same brush—I'm talking about the ones who, when they say, "We've got a youth problem," I always say, "No, we've got a parent problem." I don't think that all the parents put their kids first. I know growing up, for my mom and dad, we were number one. Through all the things we did, they were there. Now it seems that some parents are too involved with other things.

I remember when I was coaching baseball, parents used to come and, then, when we started a ballgame and we had to have an umpire or something, we had to go the parents and say, "Who wants to umpire?" What would happen then after we started getting the umpires from the parents' group that would come? Pretty soon, parents wouldn't come until the game had started so they wouldn't be picked.

LD: [Laughter]

GD: I think that kind of parental involvement is important, and again, education. Education is the key. Education will open up the door. I think, for whatever reason, the system still hasn't gotten it right.

LD: Yes. Tell me about that. What do think we need in the system? What does the system need to do to help these kids succeed?

GD: Again, it's about that relationship. I could point to some teachers that I could say, "Man, if it wasn't for Mr. Funk or if it wasn't for Mr. Mauer who either patted me on the back or told me, 'I'm going to shove my foot up your ass, man . . .'"

LD: [Laughter]

GD: That's what you need.

There doesn't seem to be that relationship going on out there. It just seems like for the times that we're in, teachers go in and they get out. Two thirty, boom! they're out that door. It's tougher for teachers today, too. The teachers today . . . You need to be a teacher. You need to be as social worker. You need to be a counselor. You need to be a mediator. You've got to do all those things.

That whole education piece . . . I wish I had the antidote.

LD: Right.

GD: But I don't. Again, we need to get that word out. When I look at the school district now, the new arrivals come in bunches. There were just about ninety of them that showed up to meet with the council. I was at another meeting a couple of weeks ago when they met Valeria. There were one hundred forty-five of them.

LD: Wow.

GD: Yes.

Then I remember when they were closing Roosevelt School, the parents got up to speak. One of the things the school board was saying was, "The school is unsafe." This lady got up and said, "Then, why do we need a building? If it's unsafe, don't close the school. Can we have classes outside then? In Mexico that's what would be done."

LD: [Laughter]

GD: I think, again, there is not that relationship. It goes back to being genuine, being honest, and being respectful. I've told teachers many times, when I've talked before them, that respect goes a long way. It worked for me. In the Hmong community, I can't speak Hmong, but I know a lot of phrases in Hmong. I can say, "Hello." I can say, "Goodbye." "Can I help you?" "I love you too much," whatever it is, but I've learned those kinds of things. What I got from my mom and my dad . . . When they would go to school and the teachers and the principals would greet them, *Buenos dias, señor,* that kind of thing.

LD: Right.

GD: But my mom and my dad would tell me, "Look what they did. Look. They took the time to learn something about us. That's a nice teacher," that kind of stuff. That's what got me thinking about that, too, with my work at the Neighborhood House. So I learned Cambodian. I know Hmong. I haven't learned Somali yet. By the time the Somalis came, I was already out of there. But those two, Cambodian and Hmong. I can still go to the West Side and go over to San Miguel. I can go to the projects and they say, "There's Gilbert," that kind of a thing.

LD: One thing, actually, we didn't touch on, and I did want to, is your involvement with the Boosters. Tell me just a little bit about that, because that's important.

GD: Okay. The West Side Boosters, again, took over when the Neighborhood House was out of the recreation thing. So this group of guys got together. There were maybe about eleven guys that said, "We need to start the Booster Club," and that's what they started to do – they started promoting it. I was with the Brown Beret's then. I became a coach with the West Side Boosters in 1970, and I started coaching all the three sports. The Boosters

are a way of life for the West Side. If you live on the West Side and your kid wants to play sports or do sports, you play for the West Side Boosters. They really do well.

A quick story is that I was coaching girls at the Neighborhood House. Eventually, we opened up a satellite building up at Baker's Center.

LD: Yes.

GD: Up by Cherokee Heights School.

LD: Yes, sure.

GD: So, now, I'm up at Baker coaching girls up there. What happened in our community, Lorena, when the flood came and we moved up to where we are now, a lot of folks that lived up there in the lomas, the hills, they moved up higher into Cherokee Park, up in that area. So now they start calling that the Upper West Side, and now, by Neighborhood House is the Lower West Side. One of the things that I was asked to do, or one of the things I wanted to do, was to find a way to get those folks from the Upper West Side to come down and hang out down at the Neighborhood House. I thought, I'm going to do some through coaching. Anyway, I'm coaching fifteen young girls up at Baker's Center. But my goal is, eventually, I'm going to have them go down to the Neighborhood House and interact, that kind of stuff. Fifteen girls practice. Boom. We'll practice for about, maybe, three weeks up there. So just before Christmas vacation, I tell the girls, "Okay, starting the new year, we're going to start having some practices down at the Neighborhood House." They said, "All right! Good. We wanted to go down there." Ten girls, during that Christmas break, called me up and said their parents told them to quit the team because they didn't want them to go down to the Neighborhood House.

LD: Wow.

GD: Yes. So talk about the prejudice and all that kind of stuff – and we're talking about the 1980s.

LD: That's 1980?

GD: Probably 1985, 1986, right around there.

LD: Wow.

GD: Yes. Upper West Side, Lower West Side. Guess what? These girls were really mad, because they wanted to play. Eventually, they did play. [Laughter]

LD: Do you think that Upper and Lower West Side thing is still as strong today?

GD: Not as strong anymore, because, now, you've got Mexicanos, you've got black folks, you've got folks living all over the West Side, except up at Cherokee Park. You

don't see too many folks of color up there yet. But every where else, we're all over the place now, even in West Saint Paul where Annapolis Street was the divider. We used to call it our Mason and Dixon Line when I was growing up.

LD: [Laughter] Sure.

GD: If you crossed that line, now you were in West Saint Paul and that's pretty white.

A quick story . . . In the year 2000, I get a call from the pastor at Augustana Lutheran Church. He said, "Gilbert, I was wondering . . . I would like to have lunch with you and some other pastors would like to have lunch with you. Can you come up and talk?" I said, "Sure." I had started a relationship with some of them. From when they called me, the meeting was two weeks out. So I'm talking with my wife and saying, "Gee, I wonder what they want to talk about."

A couple of days later, I'm up in West Saint Paul, and there I see a black family riding their bicycles as a family around in West Saint Paul. I see some Latino kids running around. I thought, ah, that's what they want to talk to me about.

LD: [Laughter]

GD: That's what it is, man. Now, we're coming up there, and, sure enough, that's what it was about. But it was cool. It was about, "You guys are up here now, Gilbert, what can we do to work together? How can we make this thing work now?" which was cool.

LD: So there's been progress.

GD: Oh, yes, absolutely. Absolutely. Yes, oh, yes. Through that church, Augustana, I went to Guatemala.

LD: Oh.

GD: I took some school supplies up there in Esmeralda. When I came back . . . It was a really heartfelt journey for me being up there, with no running water, no electricity. They make homemade stoves out of rock and stuff to make their foods. The kids were smiling. The parents were respectful. They don't have much, but when we were there, one of the big deals was when they killed a chicken so we could have some meat. It was just like, oh, man look how grateful these folks are. I come back home and the kids are worried about iPods and all this kind of stuff, and those kids were having fun just interacting with each other. Oh, it was cool. It was cool, and I'm going back this year, in July.

LD: Given all of this journey, your life journey, the journey of your community, what do you look forward to in the coming years for yourself, for the community?

GD: Again, obviously, health for my family and health for my community. But one of the things I would hope would happen is that . . . going back to education. One of the

things that happens for our high school is a lot of West Side folks that have been there generationally aren't sending their kids to Humboldt because of the reputation it has had over the years. It's been for gangs. It's not been a good school. People don't learn. I would hope that somewhere in the near future that Humboldt will come back and *be* the community school, the pride of the community that it was when I was growing up. Even before I went to Humboldt, I knew I was going to go to Humboldt and play sports for Humboldt and bring a championship to Humboldt, all that kind of thing. We're making progress—a little bit. The Humboldt girls' basketball team won the city championship.

LD: Oh, great!

GD: First time ever! All those girls, juniors and seniors, they all played, when they were five and six years old, for the West Side Boosters. Now, they're moving up. Now there's a whole new group coming up. I think a good strong school in the community just resonates that positive things are going on in the community.

LD: I thank you so much. Again, you're the first of this group of thirty interviews and it's really been my privilege to hear your story and to collect it. I really thank you.

GD: If my mother was here . . . To be the first . . . I was inducted into the Community Centers of America's Hall of Fame in Washington, D.C. a couple years ago.

LD: Wow.

GD: That was the first ever. So when we had the ceremony going on, I told my mom, "Ma, this is a good first." Because in my family, I was the first one to go on probation.

LD: [Laughter]

GD: I was the first one to get sent away. So my ma said, "Yes, this is a good first." When I hear you say, "first," again that resonated. My ma would have been happy to know I was the first one here.

LD: Well, you were a perfect start for this project.

GD: All right. I appreciate that. Again, like I said before, I appreciate that this is happening. People need to know what has gone before, and how they benefit from a lot of work that was done by many other people in the past. Sometimes it's assumed that things have always been the way they are now. They find translators in the hospitals, and in the courts, and in the schools. There's no understanding that it wasn't always that way, and that people had to fight for what today they take for granted. The diversity and multicultural awareness in the public and private sectors and civil service wasn't always there. I often want to say to our new Chicano/Latino communities, "When the doors of opportunity opened up (that we fought for), you were there to step through. You've got to remember, man, you're standing on *our* shoulders." Just like we are on the shoulders of

our parents and grandparents who sweated and toiled for a better lot in life for the next generation. I think that story hasn't been told enough.

LD: Excellent! Many thanks, again!

GD: Muchas gracias.

Lideres Latinos Oral History Project
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