Mario Duarte Narrator

Lorena Duarte Interviewer

September 17, 2010 Saint Paul, Minnesota

Mario Duarte - **MD**Lorena Duarte - **LD**

LD: My name is Lorena Duarte. I am doing the interview today with my father, Mario Duarte, here at his home in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Today is Friday, September 17, 2010.

First of all... [Chuckles] It's so funny because you're my dad, but can you, please, give me your name and date of birth?

MD: Sure. My name is Mario Duarte. I was born February 17, 1938, in San Salvador, El Salvador.

LD: Thank you. First of all, I have to say thank you so much for agreeing to be part of the Oral History Project. On a personal note, I have to say, I felt very proud because when we were selecting the people that were going to be interviewed, everyone said, "You have to interview Mario Duarte. I know he's your father, but you have to interview Mario Duarte, because he has done so much for the community."

MD: Well, that's great.

LD: So I just have to say that before we really start.

MD: Okay.

LD: It's a little usual that I, as your daughter, would be interviewing you!

MD: This does not happen every day. [Laughter]

LD: I just . . . it speaks to how much people respect you and the work that you've done. I just wanted to say that first.

MD: Thank you.

LD: Can you tell me your occupation?

MD: Right now, I'm retired. I'm seventy-two years old now. But I've been involved with the media, in general, for the last twenty-five years in Minnesota.

LD: And you're married?

MD: I'm married.

LD: Good. Those are the kind of logistics.

Let's start off with where you were born and tell me a little bit about your family.

MD: I was born in a very poor neighborhood in San Salvador, a neighborhood called San Jacinto. That's a very poor *barrio* in that city. I was born at home, because, at that time, there were not too many hospitals. So my mom brings me to this world on February 17, 1938, about 11:25 p.m.

LD: Tell me about your mom. Her name?

MD: My mom's name was Maria Luisa Duarte.

LD: And your dad's name?

MD: The name of my dad was Raul Bustamante.

LD: Did you have siblings, brothers and sisters?

MD: Yes, I had two sisters, and a brother who died very young.

LD: Were you the oldest, youngest?

MD: I'm in the middle. I have an older sister, who already died, too, and I have a younger sister who is living in El Salvador.

LD: Yolanda.

MD: Yolanda.

LD: Yolanda Duarte. [Chuckles] Tell me about growing up. What did your parents do? What was San Jacinto like?

MD: I recall growing up was a struggle every day. We had to walk to the school. The school was, maybe, a mile from where we lived. My mom, all the time, was pushing us to be on time, to be clean, and take at least a glass of milk. At that time, we got some food at school, something that's called refrigerio about 9:30 or 10:00 a.m. every morning. Before we went off to school, we had to be clean and ready.

For my first, second, and third grade...the name of the school was Juan [unclear - sounds like Tuh-ver-uh-lay]. They put you in line and check you - everybody. They say, "Okay." Everybody is in there. A couple of times, they selected me. They chose me because I looked nice and clean. I tell my ma, and she was so happy to hear that. They check if you have your shoes shined, and you're clean, and you're ready to go to classes. That was interesting.

For my fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, I went to another school which is a little far from where I live, maybe about five miles, and I had to walk every day. The name of the school where I finished my sixth grade was Escuela Republica de Chile. I have good memories mainly of this school, because that's where I really started to get involved in many things that I still like, like grammar, like geography, and history. Also, we liked to go up to play soccer after school. Sometimes, we missed school. We had to go up to play soccer, and the police were looking for us at that time. If you are not in the school between nine a.m. and five p.m., the police are chasing you. So, many times the police came and everybody would be running.

LD: [Laughter]

MD: Well, we made it. That was part of my childhood, going to school and playing soccer with my friends. At that time, there was a wild area. I can say wild because there was no control. There were a lot of trees with mangos and guavas, so I would go with my friend, after the game, and get some good mangos and good guavas. When I came home, I'd bring at least one big mango to my mom and she [words spoken in Spanish]. Yes, she was so happy that I brought something to her. That was part of my childhood. I finished sixth grade when I was thirteen years old. Basically, for my first six years at the school, that's what I remember. We took part in different competitions. Many times I was pushing to get good grades. It was not easy. There were a couple of guys much smarter than me. There were so smart, very smart. I was trying to be close to them, and they wouldn't let me. [Laughter] I wanted to know their secret. They wouldn't let me, but we were good friends. That's what I remember of my childhood.

Also, when I had free time in my home, I usually stayed home. I didn't go in the street. My mom said, "No, don't go out in the street too much. It's no good. There's nothing good on the street." She was right. I spent my time doing different things in my home. I played too, making toys, making little cars, little boxes from wood and, also, from clay. I liked to play the war, the army. I had soldiers and I made more soldiers. I made everything with clay. I used my time to do something positive; that's what I think.

LD: You grew up mostly with your mom, correct?

MD: Yes, yes.

LD: Tell me a little...what did she do? What was she like?

MD: My mom, as far as I remember, never worked. All the time she was at home taking care of the home, and cooking every day. We didn't have any refrigerator, so she had to cook every day our food, and work at cleaning our clothes, and cleaning the house. So she was more devoted to home. She was a nice lady. She told me and showed me that the best way that a person can be good is when a person is responsible, when a person is honest, when a person is going to school, and respects people. That was the main thing. She always was saying, "You have to respect your elders. You have to respect your teacher. You have to respect your friends." That is something that I still keep in my mind. That was very helpful. She only finished fifth grade, but she also liked to read. I saw her reading, and she'll say, "If you find some old magazine or something, bring it to me. I want to read." She also was reading like I do now. [Chuckles]

LD: After the sixth grade, tell me more about your education and what that was like being a teenager in San Salvador.

MD: I went to look for a higher education. I went to an institution, called Insituto El Salvador, and I went there four years. I started going to that institute during the day, but, then, there was a big change in my life, and I had to start to work when I was about fifteen years old. The rest - the second, and third, and the fourth courses, I had to finish at night. So I was working during the day and going to school at night.

LD: What was the big change?

MD: Oh, the big change was that my dad said, "I'm not going to be here anymore. I'm going to leave the house. So you have to do the best you can. You are the man of the house." He put that in my mind that I was the man of the house. I was the only male in there. There was my mom and my two sisters. So that was a big change, because, again, I had to start to find a job and I found it. I was paid, I think, 100 colon a month working Monday through Saturday. But I did it. I had to give some money to my mom and pay my tuition at the school, and I graduated.

LD: Was this kind of like high school?

MD: Yes.

LD: After high school, what did you do?

MD: I continued working. I found a better job. Then, I took different training in speech. I always like public relations. I remember there was an institution called Dale Carnegie, so I went to that for six months and graduated from that in public relationship training.

LD: Then, did you get a full time job?

MD: Yes.

LD: What was your occupation? What did you do?

MD: [Chuckles] My first job was like at a service shop. I was doing a lot of paperwork for the business, but, then I found a better job. I started to work for a big company, a big corporation in El Salvador, which was the Caterpillar/John Deere dealer, at that time. I worked for that company for eleven years.

In the meantime, I went to the National University of El Salvador taking some courses about social things.

LD: What kind of social things?

MD: Sociology.

LD: Is that where you were studying with Roque Dalton.

MD: That's when I met Roque. Roque was one of my other friends. [unclear] El Salvador.

LD: Tell me about that a little bit. Tirso is one of the [unclear].

MD: The same, yes. He was so smart. I remember him and I remember many times being invited to his house. He had a house not too far from downtown San Salvador. He'd always take us to like a second floor where you could see the sky at night.

LD: Like a balcony?

MD: Yes, like a balcony. They talked about poetry and they got inspiration in the stars. I'd think, what are these people talking about?

LD: [laughter]

MD: You know how the poets are. They were talking and talking and talking. Sometimes, I'd say, "I have to go. The last bus coming for this area is passing in ten minutes. I have to go now." They'd keep talking and talking. That was very nice. Tirso is still alive. I remember I met him in 2002 in El Salvador and Roque our friend was killed during the Civil War in El Salvador.

LD: It sure is funny, because knowing very much about your personal life, I have to go back and say, "I know you got married at some point and had some kids."

MD: Oh, yes.

LD: [laughter] When did that happen? I know you did.

MD: I know I did. That's why you're here!

[laughter]

MD: Ah, Lorena. Yes, I married Esperanza Quesada. We met at the Caterpillar/John Deere dealer company. Then, we developed some relationship, and finally, we got married. Then, you know, we had four kids, Carolina, Mario Manuel, Grazia Maria, and Lorena! Lorena is the youngest one. We were married for twenty some years.

Many things happened during the time after we got married. The company where I was working asked me to travel inside the country for different reasons, trying to give better service to the clients who lived in the countryside. I'm dealing with tractors, and they need a lot of parts, and they need a lot of attachments. They need a lot of things, and in order to get the information, you have to go out to those places. So I lived two days out of ad years a the city, and we were also working on different things - it seemed like inventory of all the different machines that the company had been selling for years and years in El Salvador.

LD: You also traveled to the United States, correct?

MD: No, not at that time.

LD: At some point you did.

MD: At some point, yes, I did.

LD: [laughter]

MD: I always liked to be involved with some organizations serving the community, so I remember I was part of what they called the Jaycees in El Salvador, Junior Chamber of Commerce. I was the chairperson of one of the committees. One of the earthquakes we had in El Salvador, I remember very well. We had to give a lot of support. We had to go and visit all those areas that had been damaged by the earthquake. We made an inventory about what the people needed. That was very interesting, working so close to the poor people there. They had nothing. They lost everything. That was a good opportunity for the first time to really participate in something in the community, and I liked it.

LD: Why did you like it?

MD: Because I come from a very poor community, and I put myself in their shoes, you know, and said, "Wow, these people are suffering. If I can, I'll help in this way or that way." So we found material, clothes, food, everything... I was coordinating the whole thing for the Chamber.

LD: During this time, the political situation in El Salvador was getting worse, correct?

MD: The political situation in El Salvador started about 1974 or 1975. People wanted to see changes in the system. We had a dictator for years and years, so he didn't

want to do any changes. Students, teachers, labor people, they started asking for changes in many ways, social, economic, and everything. The government started to kill people, you know. They didn't want to pay attention. They were thinking that by killing people, they were going to solve the problems. The problem became worse and worse and worse. There started to be a lot of violence in the country, shooting, kidnapping, bombing, robbing. That was the beginning, again, in 1975 and 1976, and we were right there.

LD: Were you still working for Caterpillar?

MD No, I had another job. I worked for a corporation, one of the largest corporations in El Salvador for twelve years.

LD: What was that one?

MD: The name of the company was Rotoflex. We were making packages for all kinds of food, medicine, drugs, candies, crackers, everything.

LD: What kind of work did you do?

MD: I was the purchasing manager for the corporation. I was in charge of buying all the raw materials we needed in order to produce all the packaging. That is when I started to travel, because many of the suppliers were from the United States and from Japan, and from Europe, and sometimes the people who were traveling didn't want to come to El Salvador because it started to be too problematic. So they said, "Well, yes, we want to talk to you about our business, but you have to come to Panama." "You have to come to Guatemala." "You have to come to Costa Rica." So the general manager of the company would travel with me. The company had their own plane. We had to travel to those places and I traveled a lot. Sometimes, we had to spend the night there, because we would hear on the radio that there had been confrontation with the army and the guerillas by the airport, and everything was closed. That was, again, risky, you know.

LD: Yes.

MD: The manager said, "No, we are going to stay here. We're going to come back tomorrow. You have to call your home." So I call my home. Sometimes I spent the night in Guatemala, and the next day we came back to El Salvador. There were so many problems in San Salvador during that part of the Civil War. Many times if you were traveling, driving from home to the place you worked, you would be in the middle of shooting between the army and the guerillas. Many times, cars are stuck on the main road from downtown San Salvador to the place where I work for hours! You can hear all the shooting and bombing. What can you do? Many people were killed in those circumstances. It was a very risky situation all those years.

LD: Yes. Tell me, is that one of the reasons that you decided to come to the U.S.?

MD: Yes. Esperanza decided it was time to move or look for a better future for the children. She made connections with one of her older sisters.

LD: Because she was here in the U.S.?

MD: She was already in the United States. Esperanza's sister applied for us - she had to apply for the whole family.

LD: Applied for a visa?

MD: As a family group. All the paperwork and all the checking and rechecking took almost seven years. I remember when she made all the papers in 1976, 1977. Then, finally, in the middle of 1982, we got the papers to come to the United States as legal residents. Carolina, the oldest daughter, and Mario Manuel, the boy, came first to Minnesota. They came to Minnesota because, at that time, Esperanza's sister lived here in Minnesota, and they were giving some support so Carolina and Mario Manuel had a place to come.

LD: They, also, came early because there was a threat, right?

MD: Oh, yes. Again, during the Civil War in El Salvador, there were so many problems, too many problems. They were looking for young people, kidnapping them, to be part of the guerillas or be part of the army. The army was also recruiting. He [Mario Manuel] escaped for a second before being kidnapped. He was not sure whether it was the army or the guerillas, but he escaped. After that happened, he didn't want to go out of the house. He was afraid. We understood that. Carolina also had a problem, because we had to travel to drop her at the school and, many times, the people from school would call us and say, "There's going to be a march here. We're going to close the college." Oh, my god! So you had to find a way to go and pick up your children, you know. Sometimes, I did it; sometimes, I asked somebody else to do it for me. Your children are not going to be in the middle of a stupid situation of fighting and shooting and all those things. That was happening. That was a daily scene. It's going to happen once a week? No. It was almost daily you can hear that. So it was kind of tense. It was kind of sad because many people who were killed were people who had nothing to do with the fight. The army was just shooting. For one year, the army put... I don't know how to say it in English. Nobody can go out. You had to stay at home from six p.m. to six a.m.

LD: Martial law.

MD: Yes, martial law, for almost a year. People here in the United States have never lived in that situation, and people don't understand. To be there every day? You had to be inside your home from six p.m. to six a.m.

LD: Is that when you went to Guatemala?

MD: That was when the guerillas moved from the city to the countryside, but when they were in the countryside, they united. There were four main guerilla groups in El Salvador, and they decided to join all together and start one group they called FMLN [Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front.] Then, they announced what they called the big offensive, La Grande Ofensivo. They're going to come to the cities, so everybody was afraid. Wow. We found a way to put at least Esperanza and the children out. You had to go to Guatemala and spend a year in Guatemala. I remember traveling almost every weekend, except for a couple of times that I couldn't make it, driving down there to see you and be with you for the weekend. When I had vacation, yes, I spent the vacation. I took Carolina, Manuel, and Gracia when they were little on a trip with me, just myself and them, far away from the cities in Guatemala, to beautiful places. They still remember that. That was part of what was going on in that part of my life. I remember that was a good experience, but, also, a sad experience, you know, when you cannot live in your adthin discourse of the second own country the way you want when crazy people are doing stupid things. That's what it is.

LD: Yes. So you came to the United States in 1982?

MD: Yes, in 1982—a big change. [laughter]

LD: Is that right, in July?

MD: Yes, we came in July.

LD: You said it was a big change. [Chuckles]

MD: Sure.

LD: Tell me. I, personally

MD: I'd been in the United States before, but I came as a tourist. I remember when I was part of the Chamber, the Junior Chamber, they sent me with a group of young people for almost month to Louisiana. We were traveling. They took me to different chapters of the Chamber in Louisiana. They were active. So I had the opportunity to be a lot of places like New Orleans and Charleston. I met a lot of interesting people at that time in Louisiana. But then I went back to El Salvador.

LD: Did you start to learn English then?

MD: Yes. I said, "It's about time."

[laughter]

MD: And I like it, so I started to listen to more music in English. I remember buying some music by old singers like Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett. I liked it because I understood a lot of what they were singing.

LD: How did you feel about your English when you first came?

MD: [laughter] That was a big challenge, because when I came to Minnesota, I was forty-five years old. That's makes a big difference, you know, in how you speak the language. It's not like people born here or people coming to this country when they're very young. They get the right accent. When I speak English, people say, "Where you do you come from?" [laughter]

I started to push myself more and more. I went to Macalester College for English as a second language. That was interesting because I was a regular student there for, I think, six months taking grammar and pronunciation. That was interesting. It's a big difference between the English you learn in school, at the college, and the English that is spoken on the street.

LD: Yes. [Chuckles]

MD: That was a little challenge, but I think, little by little, I got more into the English language.

When I came to Minnesota, I started to participate in different organizations in order to learn, not only about the organization but, also, learn about the culture.

I remember I was a volunteer with several organizations, the home shelters, and churches like Our Lady of Guadalupe, where I was helping the food shelf. There was an organization in downtown Saint Paul that I worked for. I started as a volunteer, but, then, the lady who was in charge of that saw I was good, so she gave me a little job there. The organization is Mustard Seeds - it's not downtown anymore. I learned a lot about how they handle a non-profit organization, and I was helping her to do the numbers, the paperwork of the administration. Again, I've been involved in so many different organizations. But the idea was to learn. I gave my time to these, you know, to volunteer. People here in Minnesota strongly believe in volunteerism, which is good. But, also, I did it to learn more about the society, the system, about the rules. That's very helpful. That helped me a lot. Nobody asked me. Nobody told me to do it. I just in my mind was saying, "I need to do something where I'm going to learn, not by books." I had to go and touch it and do it.

My first job here in Minnesota was for the Wilder Foundation. I worked in maintenance. I was working at night cleaning the floor with a *big* vacuum machine. I learned how to use that. I liked it.

LD: [laughter]

MD: I liked it because I could do the job in a matter of five or six hours. Then, the rest of the time, I was watching TV.

LD: [laughter]

MD: I had to be awake. That was the only thing the supervisor said... "Mario, you have to be awake." It was at night, you know. It was different. I'd never worked at night in my life. That was interesting. That was my first job.

Then, I worked for almost a year for the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

LD: Oh. What did you do?

MD: I worked as a material inspector. I had to go to different plants where they produce some concrete or asphalt. That was, basically, a thing of formulas, and numbers, and numbers, and numbers, and numbers. I had to be there before they started the production sometimes in places like... I remember a couple of times I had to go out to a plant that was located in Red Wing. So I had to travel to Red Wing early, because the job starts at six a.m. in the morning.

LD: Wow.

MD: In the summer, they would work as long as they can. Sometimes, I returned at nine or ten p.m. Many times, I was short of food. You know, the whole day, water and everything is gone, so "I'm hungry." [laughter] I'm hungry about nine p.m. That was a different kind of experience.

After that, I worked for a year for a corporation in Minnetonka, they called Lactech Corporation. I was working as a purchasing consultant. I knew one of the owners of the corporation; I met him when I was in El Salvador. He used to travel, at that time, for 3M.

He was retired, and he had been an engineer for 3M. So when I came here, I remembered, oh, I remember him. I talked with him, and he told me that he was not working anymore for 3M, and that he and some other engineers started Lactech Corporation. He gave me the opportunity to work for his corporation for a year to use my experience in raw materials and contacts. At that time, I could speak a little more English, you know, with more technical things.

LD: I want to go back. I want to hear about the rest of how your career progressed, but I want to go back just a little bit. Tell me, what was Minnesota like at that time? Were there many Latinos?

MD: Well...

LD: What were your first impressions?

MD: My first impression? This is too white.

LD: [Laughter]

MD: Even the trees are white here. [Laughter] I remember asking people, "What kind of tree is that? It's white outside." Ah, they don't know.

At that time, there were not too many Latinos here in Minnesota. The only community and the only area where you could see and talk to some people in Spanish was the West Side of Saint Paul. Many of the people came there, and that's the place where we settled, you know. We lived on the West Side of Saint Paul for about two, three, four years before we started to move around. There was only a couple of places like the grocery store where we would speak Spanish, and there was a clinic, the church, and that's it! Not too many other places, nothing. I knew that there were some Hispanic families that had moved out of the West Side of Saint Paul to Minneapolis, but it wasn't until I began to work for a non-profit organization in Minneapolis that I started to meet all those families. I worked for the Centro Cultural Chicano for five years as communication director. I was in charge of producing a monthly newsletter, a weekly radio show and a monthly TV show.

LD: Was this kind of going back to your PR training and love of PR? So you went from the Lactech Corporation to Centro?

MD: Yes. I worked five years for Centro. I learned a lot about the Chicano and Mexican communities in Minnesota. I did not know too much about the Chicano community. That was another good experience for me, learning who they are, what they've been doing - mainly the historical aspect of the Chicano community, not only in Minnesota but nationwide. It's interesting, you know, when you start to learn about ethnic groups. Each of the groups has their own identity and you're digging and digging, and the more you dig the more you learn. In my case, one of the things I like is like history, so when I like a topic, I start to dig in more and more until I say, "Yes, this is good enough." [Chuckles] Again, I was doing the monthly newsletter, which we called *Visiones de La Raza*.

I had to travel a little bit in order to get some contact with different people. Some of the Chicano people were in Moorhead, and Brainerd, and Mankato.

Doing the weekly radio show was interesting because I started to invite people from their community, from the Mexican community, the Latino community, to come and speak about different issues affecting our communities. So I started to meet a lot of people, a lot of Latinos. There were not too many, so I had to make a lot of contacts in order to find out who are the Latinos working, as an example, for United Way, or who are the Latinos working for the University of Minnesota, and I invited those people. I talked to those people. So I was learning from them, too, and seeing their points of view about education and those kinds of things. At that time they had started Chicano Studies at the University of Minnesota, and I met several professors and students at that time, interesting people.

Also, I developed this TV show for the Centro Cultural Chicano called *Hispanic Issues*. It was a monthly TV show. But in order to produce those, I had to go to school. I had to go up to Minneapolis Technical College and learn how to use a TV, and take all the training

and get a certificate. Then, I had to coordinate the whole event and I had to train the camera people. I had to coordinate the whole thing. That was very interesting, too. Everything was related to media.

I started to like more and more learning about the media. Media is, to me, the main thing that I've been doing here in Minnesota. Media gave me the opportunity to meet so many important people and to know important people, very professional people like politicians and artists. It was a good opportunity for me, and I think I learned how to deal with it. That was, to me, something different, you know. Media is interesting. Media is very powerful. You have to know how to use the media. Some people are afraid of the media, but media is very powerful. The main thing for me is that the media gives you the opportunity to be out there talking about what's going on around the world. There's no way you can say, "I didn't know," because you *are* in the media. You have to know what's going on in Minnesota. I always emphasized that we had to do a lot of this for Minnesota, because that's the place where we live. Yes, I don't forget about where we come from. I like to talk about Latin America, Mexico, Argentina, Puerto Rico, and I met a lot of people from those countries. Every time I talked to those people, I learned something.

LD: After working for Centro, you started *La Prensa de Minnesota*, right? Tell me about that.

MD: Yes. I took part in the 1990 census as a volunteer, and I had the opportunity to travel with a little group of people statewide, to Moorhead, Marshall, Willmar, Albert Lea - talking about the census. I saw the need of a means of communication for the Latino community, because we didn't have anything at that time.

So I quit my job with the Centro Cultural Chicano and started from zero *La Prensa*. I started to publish *La Prensa*, which is a bilingual newspaper. I was selling the advertising, collecting the advertising, working at the typesetting, putting the paper together, making distribution. [laughter] But, little by little, people started to recognize my efforts. Some people in the beginning did not want to believe what I was doing. They told me I was crazy. There were only about three Latinos who would say, "You're right, Mario. Go ahead. We support you." The rest said I was crazy to start a Latino newspaper in Minnesota. But I think we did it. We made it work. I had the opportunity, first of all, to provide jobs to many Latinos that came looking for a job through *La Prensa*. I didn't say, "No." I just wanted to know about their skills and how they could help me. Many, many people that I know worked for me. I have good memories of the people. There were only a couple of the people who didn't like me.

[laughter]

But I liked most of the people working for me. First of all, I have a respect for all the people working for me. They learned, but also they made money working at the job. We were in the business for fifteen years in Minnesota. Also, *La Prensa* gave me the opportunity to meet more people and travel around.

La Prensa became a member of the national organization called the Independent Latino Newspapers. There was a group of people, mainly in the South, people from Florida, from Houston, Texas, from Michigan, from New York, and from Atlanta, who were members of this organization, and they invited me to be part of that. I was the only one from the Midwest; La Prensa was the only one. They had a lot of people from California, too, who had small papers. We had meetings almost every three months. Then I became very involved with this organization, trying to get more attention to the advertisers, to the politicians, and to business that we are the Latinos. I was elected as the vice president of the board of this organization. I had to travel to Puerto Rico, to the Dominican Republic, New York, Boston. It was interesting. Again, it gave me the opportunity to meet more people and tell the people about what good things we're doing here – the good things that Latinos were doing in Minnesota.

One time I was at a convention in Florida, and I remember the guy said, "What are you doing in Minnesota? I hear it's cold." I said, "Yes, it's cold." "How cold is it there? Tell me how cold it is. I would like to go someday." Well, it's cold," I said, "like a refrigerator." "Really?" he said. "Yes, like a refrigerator, but not in the bottom – it is like the cold in the freezer." "In the freezer?! What?!" he said. "Are you crazy, Mario?! [Laughter] "Yes, I'm crazy."

But I traveled to San Diego. I traveled to L.A. [Los Angeles]. I traveled to Houston. Oh, my god! All over. The position pushed you to travel to coordinate different events, and meet big shots, big people and advertize the agency. We did pretty good. I think we did pretty good. It was another good experience that came from starting *La Prensa*.

In the meantime, I also developed the idea of the music. But before I talk about the music....

I also started two other publications in Minnesota, the first Hispanic directory. It was just me and two other guys who started it. Their names are Miguel Ramos Rafael Varela. We were the ones who started the first Hispanic directory in Minnesota. Also, I started another publication called *Latino Midwest*. That was me and Adolfo Eardonz, also. The idea of this publication was to serve the Latino community in the Midwest area, including Minnesota, but also including Wisconsin, including Iowa, including Chicago. It didn't work, but I think it was a good idea at the time being involved with the national organization and dealing with the papers. There were so many things happening at the same time, you know. I'm traveling and, how do you say, putting on different hats on every day. But that was good. I did that for almost ten years.

I always liked the radio; I liked the music. In the meantime, I'm collecting music, buying music. So I had the opportunity to be in charge of a weekly Latin program on KBEM [radio], called *Brisas Latinas*. I was in charge of that for twelve years.

LD: From when to when?

MD: Let me see... The last year I did it was 2008, before I started to work with the census.

I had the opportunity to interview very famous artists. Every time I knew that a Latino artist was coming to town, I called the agent and said, "Hey, can I interview your artist for my show?" and he said, "Oh, yes," right away. So I had the opportunity to interview artists like Tito Puente, like Poncho Sanchez, Flaco Jimenez, many, many famous people, famous artists that I never thought I was going to talk with or meet. That was another way to meet people, and I liked it. My audience at that time, they knew me by my voice.

LD: Yes.

MD: That's interesting. About a year ago, I met a person in Owatonna. She said, "You know, I used to live in the Twin Cities area. I recognize your voice." I said, "Yeesss?"

LD: [laughter]

MD: She said, "You were doing a radio show on Sunday, right?" "Yes." "Ohhh! That's nice," she said. She recognized me by my voice, which is good.

To me, the radio—when you are talking about the media—is the fastest way to communicate with the people, and mainly with Latino people. Latino people like to listen to the radio, more than reading papers, more than reading anything else. Maybe now they're watching more TV because you have the Dish. Right now, everybody likes to listen to music. All the Latinos like music, all different kinds of music, you know. It doesn't matter. To me, radio is maybe one of the best ways to reach the Latino community or the people in general. Very interesting.

LD: You were in a very unique position. You were in a very good position to look at the changes that were happening to Minnesota's Latino community. You were not only part of it, but you were reporting on it, too, through the newspaper and the radio.

MD: Yes.

LD: So, tell me about the changes that you saw from when you started *La Prensa* to now. Talk just about some of those changes that you began to see.

MD: I think the changes come from the people. People want to have change. They are responsible for that. I started to see more Hispanic or Latino businesses, which is a way to show who you are with your food, and your music. I remember when we came to Minnesota, there were only a couple of Latino businesses in the West Side of Saint Paul. There were none - none - in the City of Minneapolis, which is close by. One thing I remember at Centro Cultural Chicano is that we had a group of seniors, and the seniors got together twice a week. On Thursday they came all the way from the north side of Minneapolis to the West Side of Saint Paul. They had to bring the seniors there to buy their tortillas and beans and the chilies and all that, because there was nothing in

Minneapolis. I'm talking about 1985, 1986. After that, yes, we started to see changes. There were more Latino businesses in the area, more Latino restaurants in the area, which is good, you know. Some are kind of small businesses, but they are creating jobs for the Latino people. Some are handled by a family group. All the family is working there, the mom, the daughters, the son, everybody, which is interesting. They've got jobs.

The community has been growing in numbers tremendously. The census every ten years reflects big changes. The 2000 census reflected an increase of 169 percent, I think, of the Latino community compared to 1990. That's a big number.

LD: Yes.

MD: We'll see what happens with 2010. That final number is going to be different.

There are more professional people, too. Sometimes, people don't know that we have a lot of professional people. I'll just mention one case. During the last two years I was working for the census, I had to be in the city of Rochester [Minnesota] every week. So I had the opportunity to talk to professional people working for Mayo Clinic. You can find many Latinos, but the rest of the people don't know they are there. They live in the area. Some live in the city of Rochester, but some live in small towns. I met a Puerto Rican lady and she was living in Cannon Falls, which is away from Rochester. I think the Latinos have been contributing a lot, not only in business but also in the professions in many areas.

I would like to see more people involved in the political area. That's maybe the next process that we have to go through. Everything is handled by politicians in this country, so we need more people at that level. We have almost nothing, no political people, no Latinos in the political arena.

LD: There are a few, but not many.

MD: Very few, very few compared to the numbers. The communities are growing and the community has to reflect in many ways that it is growing, not just to be a number. Yes, we are 3,000, 2,000. It doesn't matter. That number has to be reflected in the different levels of society. Do you know what I mean? We need more Latino judges, more Latino lawyers, and more Latino professional people. That's something I would like to stress. Every time I have the opportunity to talk to young people, I say, "Okay. You have to finish school. You have to go off to school and finish, and try to get to the next level. Education is the key." Who I am is based on my education and how I've been able to educate myself, doing this and doing that, taking this training, taking this course, going to school to learn something different. I'm open to that. I open my mind to it. Again, I would like to see more young people get into the political arena. We have to start to think very strongly on that scene. Business is beautiful. Entertainment is good, also. But, we need more people in the political arena, more politicians, more Latinos.

LD: We've talked about some of the changes. Tell me about some of the contributions that you think Latinos have made in Minnesota. What have we given? What have we contributed?

MD: I think the main thing we are giving is our culture and [unclear in Spanish]. We show to the rest of the community that we are hard workers, that we don't say, "No," when you're talking about jobs. It doesn't matter what.

LD: Maybe talk about the evolution of... For example, you said there were no businesses in Minneapolis and, now, there's hundreds. Can you talk to me a little bit about some of the material contributions that we make, like economically?

MD: Well, more people, more Latinos in business, more people working for different corporations means more taxes for the state. We pay taxes. Taxes are the contribution for thousands of Latino people that were not here before. Besides my job, my skill, my volunteer work, also it's the taxes. More people, more Latinos in any business or in any job are going to produce more taxes to the State of Minnesota.

LD: What about Greater Minnesota, not just the Twin Cities? I know—we'll get to that—that you went back to the census...

MD: Yes.

LD: ...and you had to travel around. Talk to me about some of those communities and how the communities in Greater Minnesota have changed with the Latino community.

MD: They have taken a very active part in the growth of cities like Faribault, Waseca, Owatonna, Albert Lea, and Rochester. They are partners in those towns.

For example, I met a guy in Rochester. He works for the Department of Health of the city of Rochester. But, also he is the head of a local Latino parents and school association [PTA], and he is the head of the soccer tournament in Rochester and the head of a celebration for September in the city of Rochester. One person! But he's not doing everything by himself, so he brings his family, his wife, his friends. That part is very interesting, because he invites people that he knows, his *compadres*, his *comadres* to be part of what he's doing. I think that contribution is there, but maybe nobody can see it. You don't see it in money, but you can see it in the presence of those people. They're all over now; they're all over.

A couple of owners of a small restaurant had the idea to expand their business. They say, "Okay, I would like to have another restaurant," as an example, "in Owatonna." Or "I would like to have another restaurant in Waseca." "I would like to have another restaurant in Mankato." What is that? That means that they're going expand their business. They're going to provide jobs and opportunity for a lot of people, not only for Latinos. You go to a Mexican restaurant in Rochester, who do you find? It's a mix of people, white people and Mexican people. They're great! Those people are doing an

excellent job in that area with a lot of limitations. They don't have a lot of money. They don't have millions of dollars like the big corporations, but they're doing a lot. That's their contribution.

In the education area, too, they're also pushing. We have educators who are doing a good job in this area. In Owatonna organizations are taking care of all the business of the Latino community. You say, "This organization is going to be only for social issues," but that's just the beginning – like with Centro Campesino in Owatonna. Everybody comes to Centro Campasino. They're asking for help on issues like health and legal papers.

It is very interesting in Greater Minnesota to see the participation. They're not just sitting waiting for somebody to come there. They're active, very active. The women are very active, too. I attended one of the meetings in Owatonna, and there was a group of about five or six women, all talking. I asked one of them, "Do you live here in Owatonna?" "No," she said, "We come from the other side. We come from Waseca." Wow. It's not too far, but they're traveling. That means something when you are traveling just to be part of the meeting and have your input. That's a good thing. That's very good. I like that part. That's a good contribution for the Latino community.

The next change has to be education. We have to educate our community, our young people, and provide all the elements and support that we can so the kids can finish school, and continue, hopefully. Now, they're talking about the Dream [Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors] Act. Finally, they're going to do something about that. That could make a dream a reality for young people who cannot afford to go to school because it's so expensive. That's the kind of thing that I would like to see in Minnesota in the future. Minnesota is now my home, and I would like to see, not only for the Latino community, but for all the young people to get on the right track.

Another thing I also emphasize that when I talk to young people is "Don't take everything for granted." People have to learn that not everything is for granted. You have to fight. You have to show to yourself, first of all, who you are. The opportunity is there. The opportunity is there, but you have to show it to yourself that you can do it. You can do it by yourself, but, yes, you can do it with support of your parents or your relative, whatever, but you have to show to yourself who you are.

There's a lot of talent in the young people, new ideas. One of the main companies now providing jobs nationwide—I'm talking about nationwide—is a company who is hiring graphic designers or engineers who can work with the new video games, because that's a big market. So they're looking for people who are smart enough to produce new games. Who's going to do that? Young people. I cannot do that.

LD: [Chuckles]

MD: It's the young people, so it's a good opportunity right there with a \$90,000 salary. That's a lot of money! Again, they have to finish school, go for training to learn how to

do that, and, then, they're in the market. Again, what is it? Education. Education. Education. Period.

LD: Let's go back a little bit now to *La Prensa* and the evolution of *La Prensa*. You actually sold it after fifteen years? Correct?

MD: Yes, in 2006.

LD: Tell me about what *La Prensa* was like. What are you proud of in this accomplishment in Minnesota? Tell me about *La Prensa*.

MD: Well, *La Prensa* was the pioneer of the Latino newspapers in the State of Minnesota. I'm so proud because we put the Latinos on the map in Minnesota. I started to look for good stories. I started *La Prensa* because, at the time, all that you read in the big media about Latinos was a bad scene. You know, Latinos on drugs and crimes and robbing, and all that. I told myself, "Well, there's good people in the Latino community." I decided if I start a newspaper, I'm going to find good stories. That's what we did through the years. We would find good stories from the people that were doing good jobs, something positive for the community – and not only in the Latino community, but the community in general. I had the opportunity to work directly with people who came here for a master's degree at different colleges like Hamline. When they went back to their country, Chile or Colombia, or Venezuela, they were my correspondents.

LD: Yes.

MD: Yes, you remember that. We were working very closely with those people. So we had a different input. We were giving to the community, the Latino community, what the Latino people wanted to see and read from the real reporting, from real stories happening. It was not media that's screened. We got it direct from those people. That was very good. We had a correspondent in Chile and Colombia and Panama and El Salvador and Mexico. We had it, and that was a different concept from the other papers. That was what gave the feeling, the flavor to the paper. That's what made such a difference. Now, there's several papers that repeated and copied it. You have to give something different to the people. Every time I'm looking for something... I watch some of the TV channels, not all. They're just repeating and copying over and over. I think in order to succeed, in order to do something, you have to do something different. You have to have your own ideas, something original. That's what it is, and I think we did it.

LD: Tell me about after *La Prensa*. After 2006, what did you do?

MD: [Chuckles] Well, we sold *La Prensa*. We went with Latino Communications, so I was working as a vice president for development for the LCN.

LD: Which is Latino Communications...?

MD: Latino Communications Network, LCN. I continued in part what I was doing before with *La Prensa*, although I was maybe more focused on events. I was working more closely with organizations - not all the clients, but a little more in general sales. I was dealing with special clients and special events that we were trying to organize. I think it was pretty good, too.

Then, *La Prensa* and all the other papers they had at LCN got all together, which is good, too. The paper has changed the last two years, big changes, mainly with the new technology. New technology is affecting the business one way or the other. You can read *La Prensa* now online, which is good. It's something that we didn't have before. So more people read *La Prensa* online. You don't have to subscribe; it's right there, which is good, you know. I worked for two years there.

Then, from 2009 until last May, I worked for the United States Census Bureau.

LD: It was like you came full circle because you started as a volunteer with the census bureau.

MD: Yes.

LD: Why did you want to work for the census?

MD: Well, I met the director of the Census Bureau in November 2008. He wanted to talk about the media, how the media can work with the census at the time. I told him something that I didn't like from the 2000 census. He looked at me and said "What?" I made a breakdown of how they could do the job better. He said, "You know, you should apply for a job. I think we have a job for you." [Chuckles] I said, "Really?" "Yes, you have experience. You know the community. I like the way you critique, how you're telling me what was wrong." So that's the way it started. I applied, and, yes, it was a long process of working for the government. I'd never worked for the government, but it was a good experience. I worked as a partnership specialist from January 2009 to May 2010. I was working from the city of Rochester, mainly.

LD: You were encouraging people to sign up and you were doing kind of outreach through all these different communities?

MD: Well, it was a combination. Down there, I had to open different venues. I had to talk to the commissioner, to the mayor, to the priests, everybody, the main people who were working in those areas. Many people were a little reluctant. They didn't want to hear about the census. With many of the people that I talked to, I had to explain everything from the bottom. I had to deal with an organization that had never heard about the census, like the Somali community in Rochester. They don't have a census in their country, so for the people who came here, some of the people who are living now in Minnesota, it's the first time they took part in the census. They were not here in 2000.

LD: Why was that important to you? Why was it important that they be counted?

MD: It was important because they're living here in Minnesota, and they had to be counted. I think the biggest challenge for me was to deal with communities that I don't know at all, but I found a way to do it. I'm not shy. [Chuckles] You know that. I found a way, and talked to different people working in the Somali community. I talked to the director of the organization doing some TV show. It took me about three months to convince this guy that we can do something about the census, because they didn't know anything about it. This is what happens in their community. The older people don't know how to read and write. The young people maybe can speak the language, but they don't know how to write the language. Everything is verbal.

I talked to this guy and he finally said, "Okay. We're going to do something. Let me talk to the older people, and maybe they'll want to meet you, and you're going to explain to them about the Census Bureau. So, one day he called me and said, "Mario, are you ready?" "Yes, I'm ready." [Chuckles] "You're going to meet the elder people in our community." I went to this meeting, and there were eight elder people, and they looked at me so seriously. At least two of them could speak English. So I explained. They are people that are old like me. [Laughter] I said, "Oh, we are even here." I started making jokes, and they started to laugh, because they translated.

After two hours of talking to them, I answered all the questions they had about it. All the older people had so many questions, and I answered all the questions they had. The one looked like the chief, and he said, "You explained the purpose of the census so clearly. We're going to support you. This is what we're going to do. Me and three of my partners, we're going to our TV show, and we're going to speak about the census." And that's exactly what they did! They explained to their community in their language about the census for twenty-five minutes, which is good. To me, it was, wow! This was a different community that I didn't know at all. The rest was good, too, but this was the best, a good experience, and I'm going to remember it for a long time.

LD: You got very good responses there.

MD: Oh, yes, yes. We had very good responses in the city of Rochester.

LD: You've done so much in your life.

Tell me what are some of the things that have brought you satisfaction, the things that you're proud of throughout your life that you've done.

MD: What makes me proud?

LD: Yes.

MD: It makes me proud that I am who I am. It makes me proud about my roots, where I come from. When you want to do something, you have to show to yourself that you can do it. Don't hesitate. If you have a dream, make your dream a reality. But it's a lot of

commitment to yourself. You have to be proud of who you are, first of all, and work on that base and try to be a better person every day. Take care of yourself so you can take care of the people around you. Love yourself so you can love the people around you. Respect people. You have to respect yourself, but also respect your friends, your family.

LD: What your mother taught you.

MD: Yes. I learned many things as a little boy about respect, respect, respect. I like that. Every time I talk to other people, I say, "I respect you. I like you, but, also, I'm asking you to respect me." It's a mutual understanding, you know. I think it's a good way to tell people who you are. Some people, maybe, don't like it, but what can I do? I like to say how I feel; sometimes maybe I'm too direct. I also had to learn to be very direct, with no going around the bushes. Some people don't like that, but it's good. You save a lot of your time, your personal time, and everything is clear from the beginning. Don't hesitate. I'm proud to be the way I am.

I'm proud to pass the message to the young people about education. I'm proud of that. I'm not saying I'm a good example, but if I did it and came to Minnesota when I was forty-five, I don't see why not the young people cannot do it. There's no excuses. That's what it is. People invent excuses and say, "Oh, no. It's too hard." No, no, no, there's no excuses. I'm not saying that you're going to be perfect. Nobody is perfect in this world, but you have to try. First of all, convince yourself that you can do it, that you're good. You're good as a human person. That's the main thing. You as a human person are unique. I'm proud of who I am, but, also, I'm proud of the people that I know because I know how they are, and I know also that they are very unique. I respect those people in that way. You are unique. Your mom is unique. Everybody is unique. That's a good feeling, you know. It's a good feeling. That's something I would like people here to learn about me, that I'm proud of who I am. Don't hesitate. Fight! Fight!

LD: What are you proud of as far as your accomplishments, what you've done?

MD: Why else am I proud?

LD: Yes, like your own accomplishments?

MD: Well, speaking to you in a different language, I'm proud. [laughter] In the beginning, I felt very frustrated when I came because I didn't know how to express my feelings, my thoughts. I remember one time I went to a parents' meeting at Humboldt School relating to Manuel and Gracia, and I wanted to say something and I couldn't! I couldn't find the words. I couldn't find a way to say how I felt, or how the thing was affecting me, and what the people should be doing. But I think I can do it now. I can express my feelings. I don't want to hurt anybody else because I don't want anybody to hurt my feelings, but I know how to say it now.

LD: What about in the community? What are you proud of in the community that either you have done or others people in this community have done?

MD: In the community? It's kind of hard. It's large. It's a very different community, with different components. If you're talking about the Latino community, we have people from so many diverse backgrounds, so many diverse countries. Each one of them is different, the cultural things, roots, education, you name it. But all have their own values. All have their own good examples. I like to copy good examples. I don't like the negative things. To me, negative things call for more negative. If I see something positive, I tell the people, "Oh, you're doing something good. Congratulations." I keep it in my mind as a good example to do in the future, something I can do in the future. To me, I've got a good example and good teaching from people from another culture. I'm talking about people from Mexico, people from Colombia, Puerto Rico, you name it, people from Peru. I like the people from Chile that I know. I say, "Wow, this is good." I take it as a good example because I can see it. It's a different thing when you're watching TV; that's a different thing. They show the main aspect of something, but when you're talking to a person, one to one, you really absorb something good. I like to do that.

LD: Thinking about Minnesota and the Latino community here in Minnesota, what are some of the challenges in the years ahead?

MD: The challenges for the Latino community in the years ahead depend on how you feel and what you think. I struggled with belated education, so I can say that education is the challenge, and not only for the Latino community. I would like to see, as I said before, the Latino community go to the next step, to a different level. The only way they're going to get there is through education.

Also, I think they have to find a way to work together. So far we don't have any organization that can say, "Yes, we represent all the Latinos." That's no good. We should find a way, an inspiration, like the African-American community had with Martin Luther King. They were marching. Do you know what I mean?

LD: Yes.

MD: We don't have a real leader who can say, "It doesn't matter what's coming." The African-Americans see Martin Luther King as their leader in many ways: the spiritual, the political, the social leader. That's what I'm talking about. We need that. That's what we need, and that's a big challenge. We have to find not only a person who is running for a political office and is elected, but that person has to use their skill in order to get all the people together. We need that. We come from different parts of the world, different countries, and each one is thinking we are the best. And we're not the best. We are equal.

LD: Yes. What are your hopes for the Latino community in Minnesota?

MD: I hope the Latino community goes, again, to the next level socially. Socially they need to do a lot more about security. We have to look for that. People have to recognize who we are. Not just, "Oh, he's a Latino and he doesn't know what he's doing." Security means security from everybody, respect from everybody.

LD: Yes, you mean not being afraid...

MD: Not being afraid. Because I look Latino, they're going to stop me. I'm talking about immigration, which is a very hot issue. It's going to be a hot issue. It has been a hot issue since the beginning of this country. In the beginning they don't like Italians, they don't like the Polish. It's the same, except that with the Latinos, we are closer to Mexico. You have to show to the people who you are. Don't be afraid! You're good. You have your college education. You have your skill. The only thing is that you're going to feel better if you have your security.

LD: Yes.

MD: Don't be afraid. Why are you afraid? You're not supposed to be. Sometimes I go walking and I say, "Wow. I would like the police to stop me to see what is my reaction." [Laughter] I've never been stopped by the police and asked for my paper. I look like a Latino person.

I would like the people to feel more comfortable, and for people to feel more anxious to go to the next step and participate in the community. Yes, we're going to be the largest minority in numbers in the United States, not only in Minnesota, but who are we? Are we invisible? We are not invisible. You have to tell them who you are and be proud of that and show that you are good. We are good. Everybody is good.

LD: [Laughter]

MD: Why are you laughing?

LD: Because it's so you, because I've grown up with that example. I know that I'm very lucky to have you as my example.

MD: Thank you.

LD: It's a very powerful thing to have a very strong sense of self understanding.

MD: Yes, it is

LD: I grew up with you saying that to me, so I just laugh because it means so much to me.

That's kind of what I had for the interview. Do you want to say anything more about you and Minnesota, your life, reflections on the Latino community, anything like that?

MD: The only thing I would like to say to the Latino community is that we have to find a way to work together in order that our community will be recognized. All together, we can make a better world in the future, not only for the Latinos, but for the community in general. We need that. Again, we have to start with ourselves - who we are, and then you

can share with the rest of the people who you are, and you're going to get the support not only from the Latinos, but from the rest of the community. Only in that way do I think that the community can go ahead. All are going to be speaking the same language or we'll be singing the same song. If I want to sing my own song, and I want to sing something about salsa, and you want to sing about boleros, that's going to be mixed up.

Again, it's working together. Find a way to work together, find something that's going to represent us, that's going to give a lot more meaning to our community and who we are. Our cultures are good. It doesn't matter where we come from. All are human. I think that's the only way we're going to go up to the next step, and pass this message to the new generation. The new generation has the responsibility to go ahead and succeed - and succeed not only personally, but for their family, their community, the culture, the country. Why not?

LD: Ah. Well, I want to thank you so much. It's such a strange experience to do this with you, because I've done it with other people. I feel so proud that you are my father, because you're such an incredible leader. I just thank you so much for taking the time. On behalf of the Minnesota Historical Society, we thank you for sharing your story with the people of Minnesota.

MD: Thank you, again, to the Historical Society for thinking about this. It's for our future generations. What is past is past. It's nothing that you can do much about. But you can improve whatever you're doing. I also strongly believe that whatever you're doing as a person, as a community, as a government, or as an organization, you can improve. Do it better. Then, everybody is going to feel better and going to feel more optimistic and feel ready to participate and support what you are doing. That's what it is all about.

LD: You are a remarkable person. MD: Gracias. Gracias.