## Luis Fitch Narrator

## Lorena Duarte Interviewer

# October 11, 2010 UNO Branding Offices Minneapolis, Minnesota

**LD:** My name is Lorena Duarte and it is Monday, October 11, 2010 and I'm here with Luis Fitch at his offices at UNO Branding in Minneapolis. And first of all, I just want to say, thank you so much for taking the time, I know you're very busy. So it's really wonderful to have you as part of this oral history project. If you could please start off with your name and how to spell it.

LF: Luis Fitch.

**LD:** And what's your date of birth?

**LF:** October 12<sup>th</sup>, so tomorrow is my big forty-five year old. [Laughter]

**LD:** Ah! ¡Feliz cumpleaños! [Happy birthday!] [Chuckles]

**LF:** Thank you! Will they be able to write that, *feliz cumpleaños*?

**LD:** Yes, actually I was going to say, a little Spanish is not bad, so don't worry. [Chuckles] Not whole paragraphs, but...

**LF:** What about if I nod, things like that? We always speak with our hands, how are we going to do that?

LD: Yes, I'm going to have to say, "Say yes." [Laughter]

LF: Oh yes, gotcha. Okay.

**LD:** And what is your occupation?

**LF:** A little bit of everything, but mainly I graduated with a bachelor of fine arts in design. But now Carolina [Ornelas] and I, we started the company, UNO, UNO Branding. So I'm not only the founder/partner, but I am in charge of the creative design.

**LD:** And you're married?

LF: Correct.

**LD:** And you have children?

LF: Correct. One.

**LD:** One. Okay. [Chuckles]

**LF:** His name is Luis, just like me, Albieri. Luis Albieri Fitch. He's eight years old. He thinks he's twenty-three or something.

**LD:** [Chuckles] He'll see himself in print. Okay. Alright, so first of all, I just kind of want to get some of your background.

LF: Okay.

**LD:** Where were you born?

LF: I was born in Tijuana. Raised in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico.

**LD:** And tell me, did you have siblings?

**LF:** No. I was the only one.

LD: Only child.

LF: Yes.

**LD:** And your parents. Tell me a little bit about them. Their occupations, where they were from?

**LF:** My mom was born and raised in New York City, then went to California and basically moved to Tijuana, Mexico. And so she married a Mexican person. My dad—by age four or five I didn't see him again. So I was raised by a single parent.

**LD:** And what was that like? What was growing up like? Tell me a little bit about your neighborhood, the schools you went to.

**LF:** For me it was really fun. Now I compare with my son. And it's like, man, I didn't have that much, you know. [Chuckles]

LD: Yes.

**LF:** But you never, I guess I felt like I had everything. At that time Tijuana was not overpopulated like it is now, so it was a city that probably didn't pass the million mark. Right now we're close to three and a half million people there.

LD: Wow.

**LF:** In a place that's really, it's not structured for a city. My mom wanted me to go to the best schools at first. So when I was in first grade I went to a Catholic school, right? With *monjas*.

**LD:** The nuns. [Chuckles]

**LF:** Nuns, correct. And they were very strict. And she [my mom] needed to go to Mexico City, so she left me for a month with some friends of hers. And for that whole month - I remember that it was summer so they never cut my hair. And when I went to the school, I didn't cut my hair, plus the family that I was staying with didn't have orders to cut my hair.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**LF:** So my hair by that time was quite long for a Catholic school. And I was seven years old, right, or eight at the maximum. I think I remember they probably told me a couple of times to cut my hair but my mom was not there, so I didn't know who to tell.

So they cut it for me—in front of the whole class. And so I was traumatized, because they made me feel really bad and I was crying. So that weekend my mom came back from Mexico City, and she was *so mad* that she went and talked to the superior nun. And she just took me out of that school. Her reason was because they treated me really bad, and because I was not learning anything. [Chuckles]

But I think it was more because she was not there to do what she needed to do, you know. She felt guilty, probably, and she was very young. But what I remember a lot is the power of graphic design, because one of the things she brought to the school was a poster of Jesus. It's a close-up [chuckles] with *long* hair. And she put it outside when we left.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**LF:** And I didn't understand why she did that, but then I remembered that it was Jesus and he had long hair.

LD: Right.

**LF:** And so that was her statement she made, you know! [Laughter]

**LD:** That was a very early lesson for you.

**LF:** Yes. And it was a *poster*—and I do posters now, as you know. But I mean it was like, wow! That was the way for her to make a statement. She was kind of radical, and she still is. But I remember doing that. So, anyway, she took me out of that school and then I went to a normal government school where I truly learned more, believe it or not. Because I remember in first grade I barely was reading, I didn't know how to tell time on the clock and things like that. In second grade and first grade I started again. I just picked up everything.

LD: Wow.

**LF:** In a traditional public school in Mexico.

**LD:** And your interest in art. Did that start early on?

**LF:** Yes. My mom still has a collection, and I have my own collection of drawings since I was three and four years old. I mean a big collection - each year I had a bunch of them. And so, thank God, she collected them. And I still have some when I was fourteen and fifteen. But her collection is just incredible, to see my drawings when I was three, four, five, six, seven years old. Here we were living on the most visited border on the planet. You have Tijuana being part of a third world country—at least then—and then you have San Diego being really beautiful, with museums where everything was green and nice and everything worked out really nice. So for us to cross the border in fifteen minutes, it changed *totally* our world.

She took me to these cultural centers that didn't exist in Tijuana or Mexico—well, not in Tijuana, I should say, but they do exist in Mexico, in Mexico City. But in Tijuana there were no museums or anything like that. And so we would go to Balboa Park in San Diego - that was only fifteen minutes away from Tijuana - to all these museums. There were six museums— and they're still there—for free! So the Museum of Science [Reuben H. Fleet Science Center], the San Diego Museum of Art, the Museum of Photography [Museum of Photographic Arts], the San Diego Museum of Man they were just incredible. We would go there twice a month. We'd go to the zoo that was next to it. And these are some of the best museums in Southern California. And so all that, it just influenced me directly and indirectly. Even without that I would have still drawn.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** But that just kind of started educating me about who were the masters in contemporary art and all that. Plus, because of my interest in art, my mom would always save money to buy me books of art. And so I still have a collection of books of art that I've had ever since I was a kid. So instead of getting a bicycle or something like that for a birthday, I would get a book about Picasso, you know, a biography or Salvador Dali's latest book. I mean, I still have those. And now I give it to my son. But it's interesting to go back to it. You know, to something so simple that influenced me and guided me. So, with no money, my mom was able to be very creative and entertain me and enlighten me with things that probably *she* liked and she thought I was going to like. And, thank God, *I* liked it too.

My son doesn't like design. You know, he doesn't like art. So when I take them to museums, he just rolls his eyes like, oh, another museum or another, you know.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**LF:** But you can ask him in a conversation about any architect, any designer, and he will *know* and understand. And for an eight year old kid that's like incredible. He knows a *lot* more than what I knew when I was eight, because he lives and breathes it, you know. What he likes is

science and math. So I'm doing the same thing, but now it is science and math for him, so it's different. It's really interesting.

**LD:** Yes, absolutely.

**LF:** Basically, it was great until I was eleven or twelve and thirteen when I went to junior high school. And then is when I knew exactly what I wanted to do: I wanted to be a painter. I wanted to be a fine artist. But there was no such thing in Tijuana to take that seriously. And so I was doing a combination of experimentation with art protest paintings and murals and alternative illustrations for magazines. But at the same time I was doing my own fine art and having already shows, you know.

**LD:** In high school?

**LF:** Yes. And people were already collecting my work. They were very serious. Just a few galleries in Tijuana that already collected my art, and families who were buying my work. And that's how I became a fine artist/illustrator, and then from an illustrator to a commercial illustrator, and then from commercial illustration to do branding and logos and identities. All without understanding design. There was no school or anything like that. I was just, it seems natural, the process.

LD: Yes.

LF: You know, because one thing that I really liked was money.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**LF:** And so fine art was not enough. Fine art was, it would take too long and it was too much hassle to go and lose fifty percent in a gallery commission. And it was just too hidden. I didn't have control of the sale of my work. Where in branding, I did have total control, because in logos or anything that I did as graphic design, it was just me and the client.

LD: Right.

**LF:** And I didn't have to give anybody fifty percent. [Chuckles]

**LD:** I want to kind of get into that, that journey and that progression. But let me kind of step back just a little bit.

LF: Okay.

**LD:** As you were growing up in Tijuana. It just struck me about what you just said, is you were doing some protest art, etcetera. Did that revolve around...? I mean, I imagine you saw the incredible difference of how people lived.

LF: Yes.

**LD:** Did that impact you at all?

**LF:** Most definitely. I'll go back to the present time. We have right now a methodology that is called Filtros that we utilize in our office. It is basically that we filter any project that comes in here with cultural characteristics of what makes us Latinos. But the interesting thing about that is that we developed it ten years ago because of the necessity of corporations trying to understand where our visuals came from, and our communications. And really, in the early eighties, if I didn't live in Tijuana, I think Filtros would have not existed.

I'll tell you why: Tijuana was not only the most visited border on the whole planet because of Canadians and Southern Californians heading there on weekends and for July [holidays] and whatnot down to Baja, but because of people going the other way. People from El Salvador, Guatemala, and all of the poor states of Mexico—central Mexico and south Mexico—wanted to go to California, to L.A., specifically. So they all went to the main door—being Tijuana—at that time. Not everybody was able to cross, so guess what? A lot of them stayed and they liked it and developed families. And that's it, they became part of Tijuana.

Well, when I was going to school, in primary and kindergarten and junior high school and high school, the percentage of people from Tijuana was very low. Most of them were from Veracruz, Tabasco, El Salvador, I just thought that everybody was Mexican and from Tijuana. We never questioned that. But when I went to their houses and suddenly they would give me *pupusas* [El Salvadoran version of tortillas], *empanadas* [pastries that are most commonly associated with South America], or they'd celebrate something that Mexicans don't, it was strange.

### LD: Right.

**LF:** And it just hit me later in years that these people were not from Mexico. Or if they were from Mexico, they were not from Baja where we don't celebrate Day of the Dead or all these other customs. Or these food traditions that they have in another part of Mexico. You can't get it, the actual food [in Tijuana], or the recipes were not part of that geographic area. So it was really, really interesting for me in Tijuana during that period of time.

### LD: Yes.

**LF:** Right now to this date, it's interesting how something that was happening during that period of time influenced me in design. In fine art it was a little bit different. And what we were questioning—a group of us, of artists, I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen during this period of time—was the border. And it was not against the United States or against Mexico. We were just questioning, in our art, the border. Just like Berlin was questioning the Wall.

#### LD: Sure.

**LF:** Right. And so for us it was really interesting. And we would do projects. Like would get two priests, one priest from Mexico and one from the United States. And the American priest will come to Mexico and the Mexican priest will go to the United States side. And we were right on

the border. And we would marry two couples at the same time, but the couples were from different nationalities and each of them was married in the other side of the border.

LD: Oh, wow.

**LF:** And so we were questioning, and right there we were documenting the whole thing because the only thing that separated us was this border - what we called the tortilla wall.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**LF:** And at that time you could put your hand out across the border and I could touch you and you could do vice versa.

LD: Right, right. Why did you call it the tortilla wall?

**LF:** Because, to us, everybody who went from Tijuana to cross the border, they were doing it for food, for money.

LD: Oh, I see.

**LF:** And it was really easy at that time to cross the border. And so tortilla has two things, two meanings. It's the basic food of Mexicans, but at the same time it's really easy to break.

LD: Sure.

**LF:** And so I think that's why we were calling it that. [Chuckles] I really didn't question it. Nobody has ever questioned it. It just made so much sense for me to call it the tortilla wall. But yes, you're right; I think that was the reason why. One, because it's food and two, because it was really easy. I'll give you an example of another project that we did. We just went one night and we hired this guy with a torch to cut the metal. And then we brought a door, a house door, an old one. And we installed it and we'd just say, "Welcome." Then people can open it and just cross the border.

LD: Wow. So it was really, it wasn't just about fine art, it was performance art.

**LF:** In that case, yes. And then each individual would go back to their house and do their own thing. And I would do anything from protests to conceptual to happenings to decorative to *really* matching the sofa of a rich family.

LD: Okay.

**LF:** I needed the money from the rich family to do something very abstract and beautiful as pure decoration. And with that money I would do something for *me* where I don't have to solve anybody's problems. With some of that, I could do these conceptual things. Because nobody was paying us for that. [Chuckles]

LD: Right. [Laughter] Yes.

**LF:** Yes. And the police were after us and things like that. But it was great because it was more intellectual. And there were kids from Tijuana, from Ensenada, from Mexicali, but mainly from San Diego. And those kids were Mexicans and Americans who were studying progressive music or fine arts or cultural things that really were questioning the whole movement. And then you had the Chicanos.

LD: Oh.

**LF:** And so we were all getting together and it was just this crazy mix. Some people were able to speak English, some of them were not, but we all understood this thing about the border. That was the thing that was very common. So during that period of time it was really interesting for me.

LD: So tell me when you, yourself, crossed the border. [Chuckles]

**LF:** I was exactly eighteen, I remember. By the time I was eighteen I was doing a lot of fine art. Specifically for drug lords and wannabe drug lords and narco juniors and things like that, people who were collecting some of the work. And I just was hanging out with the wrong crowd. And at that time you never heard of somebody disappearing. Somebody got killed, yes, but it was between *them*. But now, it's like young kids, what they call narco juniors, they come from rich families, they are kids of politicians, and on purpose they're going after them because the police cannot stop the kid of a politician.

**LD:** Right.

**LF:** And so this whole narco junior culture started in Tijuana, but it was really interesting. These were kids who were my friends. They were kids who were very well prepared, the kids who were going to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] or UCSD [University of California, San Diego] or San Diego State University, so they were bilingual. You couldn't tell if they were Mexicans or Americans. They can speak perfect English and perfect Spanish, and they have their own sports cars and they have a girlfriend in Tijuana and another one in San Diego.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**LF:** So these guys were after that kind of kid, who was well prepared and came from a good income to do the job. And the job was to cross tons of whatever it was, of all kinds of different drugs, or to take care of the business in southern California, to find the right buyers.

LD: Right.

**LF:** Because they speak English and whatnot and they can come and go to L.A. And so . . .

**LD:** And so you were *painting* for these folks or?

LF: Well, I was . . .

**LD:** They were your customers?

**LF:** Some of them were my customers. It started as one being my neighbor. Some of them were my friends; some of them became my customers. For some of them I was doing art in their houses. But then later they needed to launder their money, and so they were opening clubs. And so it went from, "You're the guy who is creative and you're going to design this thing that I want," to then, "Well, I went to New York and I saw *this.*" And it's like, okay. So here I am, trying to download what he saw in New York at a club and doing my own version. So they were paying me for the painting, for the murals, for the decoration, for the lighting, for the logo, for the whole identity.

LD: Wow.

**LF:** And so, yes, I became, my clients usually are my friends. Not that I was doing the same things as the narco juniors were doing. That was not my . . . I had my own deal going and I was getting paid well and I was so busy that I didn't want to be part of it; it's just that I was hanging out with the wrong group.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** My best friend, my friends from my neighborhood who were these little kids, became super important with the Arellano family of brothers [Arellano Félix Tijuana Cartel].

LD: Wow.

LF: And so for my parents, they just got scared, you know.

LD: Sure.

**LF:** Because two times the police, the *federales*, stopped me and I went to jail just because I was in the wrong party. And so I think my mom, in particular, was smart enough to say, "Enough of *this*," you know. And I'm the only child. Plus she knew that I wanted to study something that didn't exist in Tijuana or Mexicali, which is the capital [of Baja California]. If I really wanted to study, I'd have to go all the way down to Mexico City at that time for architecture or fine arts. But why do that when fifty minutes away in San Diego you can do it.

LD: Sure.

**LF:** And so my mother, being American, for her it was really easy to nationalize me. All that I had to do was—by that time I'd finished junior high—to take my GED. And I passed it, because I believe that junior high in Mexico is a lot more advanced and a lot better than the United States' lower education. In the lower system over there, I remember even in the English classes that we had, it was enough for me to pass the English as a second language test in Tijuana.

**LD:** Did you speak English at home?

**LF:** No, not at all.

**LD:** Your mom always spoke Spanish to you?

**LF:** All the time, yes. And none of my friends would speak English. There was no reason. But, since I was twelve years old, all the music that I bought was in English.

LD: Ah.

**LF:** So I grew up with Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd and Boston, you know – it was that period of time. And still I've never liked Mexican traditional music. I should not say that. I enjoy it, I like all kinds of music, but I will not go and buy it or download it now.

And so I think it was because I was hanging out with a group of people that collected it, albums, and I mean they would *collect* it. They were very serious. We exchanged a lot of this music and I was into the cover art.

**LD:** Ah. [Chuckles] Yes.

**LF:** Because these were big albums, big productions. And so I knew who did it, I knew who was the art director, I knew the names of all the photographers. And there were just twenty of them in London and in L.A. who were doing the Pink Floyd or Rolling Stones albums, you know, all these big album names. And I became so into that. And into having the lyrics to match the song, that's how I really give credit to why I learned English.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**LF:** Right. Because I wanted to see what they were saying. And so with the lyrics I started understanding it and imitating it. Plus, San Diego is a flat city. Tijuana is a hill. And all the telecommunications, the local television stations from San Diego, for them to reach longer, they need their antenna to be in a higher point.

So I don't know how this worked, because from what I understand, you should not, two different countries cannot have each other's telecommunications. Now San Diego channels are obviously in San Diego, but they sent the signal to Tijuana. So that, technically, is how they get away with this politically, with this law. So I had all the local television and radio stations in English from Southern California. The latest of the latest. And it's the latest of the latest because you have Hollywood two hours away in California, in L.A.

LD: Sure.

**LF:** So it is the latest in fashion, movies, theater, circus, concerts.

**LD:** Everything.

**LF:** Everything. We were one of the first ones to get it in Latin America, in Tijuana. So if you're the Rolling Stones, you're going to go to New York, you're going to go to Chicago, you're going to go to L.A., and you're probably going to go to San Diego. And even if you don't go to San Diego, L.A. for us was two hours and a half away. It was nothing.

In San Diego we had everything. Everybody went to San Diego. So for us, fifteen minutes away was nothing. When I was a kid we used to go—like twenty of us, like gangs of kids on bicycles—and cross the border. We were all Mexicans but we didn't look Mexican, necessarily.

LD: Ah.

**LF:** Right. And we'd just say, "U.S. citizen." And they'd just let us go. Twenty of us on bicycles! Just to buy ice cream. And then we'd come back.

LD: [Chuckles]

LF: Now you have to do a line of four hours in a car to cross the border.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** And if you don't have, obviously, a passport, you cannot cross. It doesn't matter if you're Anglo or American or the President of the United States, you can just not cross. So things have changed, obviously. Times have changed.

**LD:** Right, right. This is great. I mean, the backstory is really fascinating, and that kind of melting pot of cultures, it's really amazing.

LF: Yes, yes.

**LD:** So I was kind of asking about when you first came to the United States. So you came at eighteen to study.

LF: Yes.

**LD:** And where did you study?

**LF:** I first went to a school called the NewSchool of Architecture. It was a group of postmodern architects from Southern California who started it. And it was the only architecture school outside of the universities. So it was really cool and everybody wanted to go there. I don't know how I got in. Well, I do know. When I was in junior high in Mexico, they ask you to take three years of some technical thing, you know, to become an electrician or secretary. In my case, I wanted drawing. The closest there was, was technical drawing. It was very tedious and really it's all perspective and whatnot. Well, I still have those drawings.

And so I used them as a portfolio, and they gave me a scholarship to go in because I didn't have to take a lot of the classes. But after a year, they talked to me and they said, "Here Luis, look. Here's your situation with architecture in this school. You are really, really good at drawing. You're like one of the best here. You're really good at doing three-dimensional models; you're really good at understanding the history of architecture. But you're doing really, really bad in algebra, math and English. And we're charging you a lot for that. You should go somewhere else and study that. And when you're ready, you come back." And they were right, you know. I just, I did understand English, I can say, almost perfectly, but probably my vocabulary was very limited. And definitely when it came down to writing, I just didn't know that.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** And you can't be an architect and not know algebra or math, at least in this school. So I decided to not pay the other half of the scholarship and say, okay, I'm going to go to a free school. And so I went to San Diego City College. But by that time, we were living in downtown San Diego.

**LD:** So your mom had moved?

LF: Yes. And we lived in these apartments that were just two blocks away from San Diego City College. That was just another wave of learning for me, because San Diego downtown was going through this transition from being a marine neighborhood where there was prostitution and marines and tattoo parlors and all this stuff, to these big developments. They were trying to clean it up with this big mall called Horton Plaza that was all postmodern and really crazy. And Fifth Avenue is where all these little galleries were, but people were living actually in the galleries. The owners of the galleries couldn't afford to live somewhere else. For me, I was just ten blocks away. I would go on my bicycle. And half of them were from Tijuana.

LD: Of the gallery owners?

**LF:** Yes, in San Diego. And the other half were Americans. And it was the same crowd that I was talking about before, where we were doing all of this crazy stuff. But because there is no concept of galleries in Tijuana, they had to come over here.

LD: Okay.

**LF:** So that was my second wave of like all these influences, but now I had a little bit of background of architecture and technical drawing. I'd already done a lot of logos and things like that. So I was mixing a lot of things. I was mixing what I understood of what is commercial with alternatives in a commercial way. So I was all over the place with that. And at the same time I was studying at San Diego City College, where I had the largest silk screen, the largest photo lab, the largest everything for myself.

**LD:** Because a lot of people didn't take those classes?

**LF:** A lot of the people who were there were not serious, and I was, you know.

**LD:** So you used those resources.

**LF:** Yes. And so I became quite well known. That's the guy who always gets A's, and, that's the guy who always does the freelance, and, that's the guy who always wins the competitions, that's the, you know, so I became like the pet of all the instructors. And I didn't care. You know, I finally found what I really wanted to do and I was getting paid for it and I was getting fellowships and scholarships and I was getting all those things. It was *the* best time of my life when I was in San Diego. And between my apartment, San Diego City College and these galleries, there is the San Diego Library.

LD: Oh.

**LF:** Again, empty. Other than with hobos and people just, I should not say hobos; it was people who basically didn't have a place to stay. And in summer, Southern California is really hot, so everybody's in there. And in... I was going to say winter, but there's no such thing out there.

LD: [Chuckles]

LF: So there were just people not even reading, they were just hanging out there. And I discovered the fine art department on the second floor. The people who worked there, they knew me by first name. They'd have news like, "Oh, we got your book that you ordered." It was another stop for me before I went. So at night I would party with my friends who were all artists and would talk about this and that and this movement and that. And just to make sure that I understood whether I was right or they were wrong or something, I would stop by the library and they would have the answer. There was no Internet at that time, so the library was my Internet. And it was really cool because the people who worked there finally had somebody they could work for, because they were not working.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** So books that I couldn't buy, they would buy them. They would order them. And so I was just ordering books and they were taking out things that they had never taken out before. I was ordering all kinds of stuff. And then they would say, "Luis, we've got boxes and boxes of books that we're going to throw away." And they were selling them for one dollar a box. So I would go and buy this stuff. And so you can imagine my room and my studio, it was just like books and books. I have a lot of references. It was really rich in history and reference and all that. But again, that came from my mother saying, "This is the book." And so it becomes part of the form, I guess, of learning for me.

By the time I graduated from San Diego City College, I was freelancing and doing bilingual communications for San Diego and Tijuana. And I had people who were helping me with this and that, and I had my own clients. I would spend a lot of money on my own portfolio and my own promotions and my own business cards. And I was really big on that. People who received my literature and my information before meeting me, they thought we were a big, big agency.

They were kind of disappointed when they first met me, because I was really young. [Chuckles] And they would say, "You didn't do this, right?" And I'd say, "Yes, I did this!" I was very professional in doing proposals and these things. And that was not the way that my other friends, the fine artists and the other designers in Tijuana, worked.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** So I've learned the other side. And I was combining the business side of the United States the marketing side, if you want, of the United States—with the grassroots of Tijuana, with the "we can do it all," and, "we don't need technology, we can do it with our hands." So it was always combining those two things. I was really always interested in selling things that were not tangible.

That, I think, had to go back with my mom when I was seven, eight, nine. We used to rent a truck and go all the way to L.A. to the, not the textile, where the factories were doing clothing.

**LD:** Oh, like garments?

LF: The garment district, exactly. And we would go to the ones where they were doing the highend stuff. And my mom had a really good eye for fashion, so she would pick, you know, she would pick, you know, she would invest like a thousand dollars in dresses and, for nothing, because we were buying it more than direct, we were buying them before they were out. And we would go not to Tijuana, but to one hour more, to Ensenada. Like the most important port in Baja. We would go to Ensenada to the *tiendas*, or swap meets. They call them swap meets, right, MINOSK in English?

LD: Yes, yes.

**LF:** Or flea markets.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** And so it was *dusty*, people were selling their vegetables, cilantro, tomatoes, fish and whatnot. And here we are in our car with these beautiful dresses for ladies for night. Dresses, you know, beautiful. And my mom would be on one side and I would be on the other side so they don't steal them. And once we put it up, I was kind of bored, so I would do all the graphics and all those things. But I remember that I didn't have time to put up all the graphics because people were already asking me and buying. From far away they can see exactly before asking the price how much something costs and which brand it was, because of the graphics. And I was already doing that. So we just put it together and we started doing the whole branding of the dresses in this beat up car or truck, you know, it was really interesting. And she would give me a percentage. So I was never afraid of selling, thanks to those roots.

Back in San Diego, all I needed was a more formal training in how to do an invoice, an estimate, how to fax—because we used to fax. How to send letters—because we used to send letters, right. [Laughter] Yes. And so it was more formal. And another phenomenon, too, that happened in San Diego, was that I was able to compete in a lot of things. In Tijuana we didn't have this. Like a competition for a poster for the city, a thousand dollars. So it was a thousand dollars here, a thousand dollars here, five hundred here. I was always winning competitions for design and fine art and things like that. In Tijuana, at that time, we didn't have that. We didn't have anything like that. So everything had changed.

Today, I give a lot of presentations in Mexico and the whole thing, has changed - just because of the internet. Kids in Mexico are super, super connected to the whole thing.

**LD:** I want to hear more about that.

**LF:** Yes. So we'll go with that later.

**LD:** I mean your perspective on how, I mean the very first sentence was Tijuana had a million people and now it has like three plus. So your perspective is really interesting that that happened in your lifetime.

LF: Yes.

**LD:** So you're in Southern California, you've graduated, you're a freelancer. When did you move to Minnesota? Was it many years later?

LF: From eighteen to almost twenty-two, during those years I was doing a lot of freelance in San Diego. It wasn't until the dean of the graphic design department at San Diego City College said, "You know what, Luis, you are the type of student who needs to go to Art Center [Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California]." I'm like, Art Center? You know, I keep hearing Art Center. And it is Art Center this, Art Center that, and it's this school that started in the twenties in L.A. for the whole movie industry. They needed photographers, filmmakers, designers, prop makers and auto design. Well, later I found out it was the Harvard of design, basically. And we went—a group of us graphic designer students—to visit Pasadena and see the school. We were just blown away, basically. Architecturally it was like totally Bauhaus, very minimalistic, very clean, in a place in the mountains. And the school is located in between a canyon. It's just incredible. And as soon as you enter it, they've got these incredible galleries and I was just like, wow! I was just scared. I remember the first day I was so scared, because that was not very characteristic of me. It was like, finally I got it; that all the people that I admire, all the people who were my instructors, all the people who had agencies and all the people that I follow in those record sleeves went to Art Center.

LD: Oh, wow.

**LF:** And so I recognized the name. And when they told me, "Well, you know this person and you know that person" it's like, yes, I do! They were from there! They all graduated from there. And so I talked to my mom and she said, "well, let's go and let's check it out and see if we can afford it." Just to give you an idea, I went in 1988, 1989 and I graduated in 1990, the summer of 1990. Yes. And at that time, a trimester cost \$1,800. For me, for us, it was a lot of money. Plus,

you had to pay for your own food and your own rent and all the other stuff. Right now it costs \$14,000.

**LD:** A trimester?

**LF:** \$14,000 a trimester.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

**LF:** [Chuckles] And it's not one of the most expensive schools in the world. The School of Visual Arts in New York, I've heard that it's more expensive. So that gives you an idea.

**LD:** Of how things have changed.

**LF:** Right, yes. I asked if there were any Mexicans there. And they said, "There's only one." And that was this rich kid from Mexico City who was a photographer and he was already graduating. And I became a really close friend of his because that was it, I was the only one. The dean of graphic design, his name is James Miho, was really famous in the 1960s. One of the reasons they hired him is because he was Japanese American. He wanted to bring more minority people. And so I was his first experiment.

**LD:** You were the guinea pig.

**LF:** Yes, I was. And there was an instructor there from Mexico who really was a big influence on my career at that level. Once I came into Art Center I knew that was a totally different ball game. When I was in City College, I hate to say this, but I was the star. But now, the rest of the students in Art Center, we were all stars from different colleges.

LD: Right.

**LF:** So the people who were there, we were like at the same level. And everybody was very competitive. But because of my background, I'd already had an agency. In my own world I was already selling. I was very competitive.

One of the first things that Art Center—it's a two year program—one of the first things they don't allow you to do is to freelance. You cannot freelance; you cannot be doing any work. They want you to concentrate. And anything that you invent, they own.

LD: Oh, my!

**LF:** Yes. [Chuckles] Because we used to do a lot of things. And so they own it. So that's part of the contract, you deal with it and that's fine. But I was still freelancing, because if not I couldn't afford it.

LD: Ah.

**LF:** Right. At least the first trimester. Then right away my portfolio just became like a totally different thing and I started winning all these scholarships. I went for free, basically. And the reason is because I could prove that my family didn't have enough money—that was one way—at least to pay that much. Second, because they considered me minority. And, too, because of my work and because of my grades. And so it was a combination of all of them. You couldn't have bad grades and still, as a minority get the money—no way, there was no such thing.

There was also funding because there was this guy who in the 1970s became a multi-multimillionaire photographer from San Diego. He died from cancer and left all his money to Art Center only for people who were minorities from San Diego.

**LD:** Well, there you go. [Laughter]

**LF:** So each trimester I would get that. It was like one of them that I would get and then I would do more and I would get other stuff. And so the money was not a problem at Art Center for me because of that. I was very lucky with that. Then I became the president at eighth term, the president of the graphic design. And they would give us money to bring people to talk. I brought Keith Haring. I don't know if you know, he's a fine artist—he was a fine artist in the 1980s, really big.

LD: Sure.

LF: I was a big admirer because he was a fine artist/activist who really went out there and he did what I always wanted to do. I wanted to bring street art into the museums and he did. People respect him at the museums, at the galleries and on the streets. I think he was the first artist that I saw doing exactly what I always wanted to do. He developed a career - you could have his graphic design tee shirt for ten dollars or buy a piece of art for half a million dollars in the museum in Germany. So it was really, really cool, and we brought him. In the school there's no art, there's no design, the walls are all concrete. There's nothing. There's not a piece of art anywhere, because that's all we do.

**LD:** Right.

**LF:** You go to the classrooms and you see it everywhere. But he did one piece of art, and it was like twenty feet by forty feet, it is a big mural outside of the library at Art Center. And he did it talking about AIDS, because he had AIDS. And so, basically, his idea was that he wanted the mural up until they find a cure for AIDS. So it's still up there. But he did it in less than eight hours, nonstop. And then three months later he died from AIDS.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

**LF:** I was always really glad, you know, that I had a chance to go to that school, that I had a chance to meet one of my heroes. I had the chance to bring him and I had a chance to see somebody put up a mural.

I always, you know, was really impressed with that. So back to your question, I graduated from Art Center, but before graduating I always had people, companies, asking me if I wanted to work for them at an internship. And I didn't want to, because I wanted to finish school in two years. I had it all figured out. Plus, I didn't want to lose my apartment because I had one of the best apartments close to the school with the biggest room with my own bathroom and my own space outside to do fine art. And if I would have moved, I would have lost that. Well, I couldn't afford to live in San Francisco and have that facility.

**LD:** Right.

**LF:** So I graduated, and when I graduated I had different offers. One that I was really considering was in Glendale, California, that is just ten minutes from Pasadena. It was to work for Walt Disney in the creative department. And at that time they were finalizing the touches for the Walt Disney Paris park [Disneyland Paris].

I had friends who were ahead of me in school who graduated that went to work for them. And they were getting paid really well for a student just being graduated. And I was jealous, you know, it was like, wow man, you're working for Mickey Mouse and you're making this much money.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**LF:** But they were really, really bored. They said, "Don't come here." And I said, why? "It's like, for the last six months we've been designing *trash cans*. Just one trash can. Just hundreds of designs."

I thought that's got to be boring. And I was into things like coming up with a name, doing the logo, picking up the materials, coming up with the overall concept, very 360°. And these guys were just doing one part of that.

I said no. So I interviewed with them just for the experience and they made me an offer and I said no. They were honest. They told me, "Yes, you're going to be working in environmental design. You're going to be doing this and that's how it works." I said, forget it. Then I interviewed with the CIA. [Chuckles]

**LD:** Uh . .

LF: I know!

**LD:** [Laughing] The Culinary Institute of America? Or the actual intelligence agency?

LF: [Chuckles] No, no. The CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. Yes.

My group, when we started the first term, we were twenty-five people. When we graduated, we were eight.

LD: Wow.

**LF:** Some people, in sixth term, felt that was it, because of pressure. It was very competitive and very military. But some left because of financials, and some of them because at sixth term you were really, really good. So they were getting offers.

I didn't want to leave without that little diploma, you know. Plus, I had it easy financially. Well, not easy. I had to prove myself all the time.

But anyway, I've always been following this company that happened to have the same last name. It was called Fitch, and Rodney Fitch was considered the father of retail design in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1980s he started going global and buying up a lot of design agencies in the United States, one of them in Columbus, Ohio. In all these magazines and all these books that I've been collecting, Fitch was always there. Now it wasn't just that they stand out because it was my last name, but they stand out because they did the kind of work I wanted to do. They were doing hypermarkets, they were doing huge malls around the world, pavilions for the World Expos for all the countries. They were doing packaging. You know, all the cool stuff that I was into, they were doing it. They were very holistic, how they were doing it. And so I interviewed with them and they hired me. And I never understood until now, why they did hire me. Because my portfolio at Art Center was really, really Mexican.

LD: Oh.

**LF:** And let me tell you what I mean by that. In Advanced Packaging 101, you have to do a whole series of packaging for a dairy product. Well, everybody in my class did dairy products from, you know, what is it, Altadena Dairy—the one in California. And I would go in to my instructor and say, hey, can I do a dairy but from Mexico or Latin America? And he said, "I don't care. It's got to be dairy." So here I am with my *leche* [dairy] products and all of this stuff.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

LF: But with a different context and a different flavor and a different demographic.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** So I always was going back to my culture—at least what I thought it was my culture, because at the end of the day, once I had a chance to travel Mexico, I found that Tijuana was not Mexico! [Chuckles]

**LD:** Yes. [Laughs]

**LF:** We were more influenced by the United States than anything else. But, technically, you are Mexican. Plus, all these other people from Mexico are. Plus, we had a new wave of people coming to Tijuana after the earthquake in Mexico City. That's another thing I forgot to mention.

**LD:** Right. In 1985.

**LF:** Yes, so that brought even *more* people there.

When I interviewed with Fitch, I said, yes, make me an offer. And I got paid more than anybody else of those other eight people, but I had to go to Columbus, Ohio.

So I go to Columbus, Ohio, and I'm an associate art director. And my first project, guess what it is? To design the whole environment for Walt Disney in Key West.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**LF:** In Orlando, with a Key West style. So that was really cool. I did what I wanted without having to work for Disney. And I was totally in charge of all the graphic environment. It was a huge project. We were a big team, but still, I worked with Mickey Mouse at the end of the day.

**LD:** I thought you were going to say that you had to design a trash can!

LF: No, no. [Laughter] I actually did, but just one!

**LD:** But just one. [Laughter]

LF: Yes. Once I had the look, it was ready to go. So that was a big project. We were doing big projects like that, very holistic, and it was really cool. My learning at Fitch, it was one year. And I'll tell you why I lasted only one year there. I knew that if I lasted more, I was always going to be that student who came from Art Center. They were always going to look at me as a student. And I proved that once when I had a chance to go on vacation I went to Mexico City, because to me it was the center of Mexico, not because of being the capital, but because of it being a cultural center. And I wanted to do some research in their libraries and things like that. And so I went, because I was still doing freelance with this Mexican thing.

**LD:** Even while you were working with Fitch?

**LF:** Yes, because believe it or not, in Columbus, Ohio, there were these little mom and pop Mexican burrito places and whatnot that I would go in and say, come on, guys, this place sucks, let's do something. It's like, what is the logo? Let me show you. And I'd show my portfolio and my magazines and all this and they would go, "Wow!"

But they would say, "Well, we can't afford it." And it's like, look, I'm just charging you five hundred dollars. "No, we can't afford it." I'll tell you what. Give me food for two months—me and my friends—and beers and whatever I want. "Oh, yes, no problem." Then I would do these changes for them. And they would do it; they would go to Home Depot in a week and we would transform the place with signage and everything. And I mean, seriously, the whole place went like crazy, you know. This is when *Like Water for Chocolate* the movie came out, but already she [author Laura Esquivel] had the book out and it was a number one hit.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** I bought the book for them. And then I bought the one where they had recipes. And I said, you need to do a whole thing about these recipes and let's advertise it. And he's like, "What is this?" They didn't have any idea, these were recent immigrants. But I was foreseeing what could happen, and I knew the movie was going to come out. Well, by the time the movie came out, and these guys have two or three of these recipes down to a science, there were lines of people waiting to come in.

LD: Wow.

**LF:** He started paying me. I didn't ask him, one day he just showed up with like one hundred bills, like three thousand. Here, it's like, boom!

LD: Wow!

**LF:** You know, he was so happy that I did something like that. I don't do freelance because I want to make money. I was doing well at Fitch. I just saw that these people have everything but they don't have the marketing or the branding or the design, or they don't know how to put out the visual cues of their culture. And I don't mean just ornamentally, but even down to the menu. I'm a foodie, so I like to cook, so I would go back to the kitchen. It's like, you're doing this right, mole should be done this way and this way. And then we'd taste it until it was right. Then we'd put it on the menu and make a big deal. So I got known in our community and Columbus, Ohio for this. This is the guy who transforms stuff and magic happens! And so everybody was after me. I started putting this work in local design competitions, and I started winning all the prizes locally and regionally with my freelance Mexican designs. Not with the Fitch and the other work, because I was competing with the Fitch work, too, and I never won.

**LD:** Wow, so it was the mom and pops that got you the prizes.

**LF:** Yes. It was really, really interesting. I went to Mexico for vacation one day, and I'm in a gallery. And a friend of mine says, "Oh, I saw your artwork. You've got to meet this guy, he's running the best gallery in Mexico." This guy was kind of a gallery owner/crook.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**LF:** Because the gallery was inside of a house, you couldn't see it, and there was nowhere it said that it was a gallery. Because this guy was connected, we were able to go in and see it. He had fine art painters from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. Original Diegos [Diego Rivera], Fridas [Frida Kahlos], prints, everything, everybody! *Everywhere*. And what it was, it was *monte de piedad* (in English, a pawn shop) for rich people . I don't want this Frida anymore, I want ten [José Clemente] Orozcos. I don't want this Orozco. So he was like a mafia guy who'd exchange it. Probably he had real ones, fake ones, people just stole some, I don't know.

LD: Yes, yes.

**LF:** But even straight museums will go and buy stuff from him. He was the man, or still is. And all I wanted—he would do once a year a cool show for somebody young. And so they thought of me somehow, and I went to talk to him. At this gallery show that night he introduced me to a person. And this person says, "Señor Fitch, you know we've been doing a lot of research of your company and we received a brochure." And yes, he had a brochure, but not the one we used in the United States; he had a brochure from Fitch from London. And I knew it because I had one—not with me, but I knew.

LD: Yes, yes.

**LF:** Because it was different. Because over there in Europe we promote more hypermarkets, these huge retailers like - imagine Target and SuperTarget, together.

LD: Sure, yes.

**LF:** But it would also have something like a large pharmacy, large bank, Kinkos, and an Apple Computer in it.

**LD:** [Laughs] Wow.

**LF:** So, seriously, it was just one place. Those are the hypermarkets. And Rodney Fitch invented these. And he was the most successful around the world, in Japan, everywhere he was doing these. And so this guy in Mexico received that brochure. I saw that he thinks I'm the owner of [Fitch] because I gave him my business card.

**LD:** Because of your last name.

**LF:** Because of my last name, because it says Fitch. And it says associate art director. He didn't know associate art director—associate art director is like the lowest, right. He thought I was the highest.

kept saying, I'm not, I'm not. And the more I keep saying it, he thought, okay, so you're the son. And I'd say, no, this is my story, I'm from Tijuana. Basically, the guy said, "Look, I want you. When you leave, stop by our offices and we will fly you back to Columbus, Ohio in our private jet." Right, the corporate jet [for his company, Cifra]. "And I want you to bring your group of people because we want to give you some work." I didn't know who Cifra was, I didn't have a chance to investigate more about Cifra. There was no Internet. It's not like, oh, Cifra, you go and find out right away. So I have to give it to the people in the office, to the sales department. In the sales department there were like twenty of them, and right away they find out that Cifra is the largest retailer in Latin America. It happens to be in Mexico. The sales people were asking, "Why would they want us?" I mean they're the leaders; they've got everything going on. But one thing that nobody was thinking. It was 1991, 1992, and NAFTA [the North American Free Trade Agreement] was just happening.

**LD:** Right, yes.

**LF:** Right. And so they knew something that they never told us because it was confidential until later. So they gave me the work, and I headed up five supermarkets in Mexico City with different demographics and geographic areas to test and do a rollout of a concept. Basically, to clean it up and see how fast they could turn these around. He was the vice president and the chief marketing officer, CMO, of Grupo Cifra. He was a very impressive guy, very smart. Finally, when we did those five, we found out that the reason they were spending so much money and so fast and whatnot was because of Walmart coming in.

He had knowledge that Walmart was going to come in, so they wanted to be prepared. And at the end of the day, Walmart bought Cifra, so it didn't matter. But we made three million dollars in less than a year. I was the creative director, the art director, the graphic designer, the translator, the public relations, I was everything. [Chuckles] We were three hundred fifty people at Fitch in Columbus, Ohio, and I was the only one who speaks Spanish. I was the only one who knew the culture. And when I told them, Let's work in Mexico, let's do work in Latin America, they said, "No. Because they don't pay." And they were right, they didn't pay on time.

It was very difficult. Fitch was doing a lot of work in the United States, and there was no need to go to Mexico or Latin America for them. I was like, well, you want it, yes or no? And they said okay, so they put me in a little team—a SWAT team, we called them—and so I got six people, the best hotel. There were no computers at that time, everything was Xerox machines and faxes and drawings. A drawing will go, you know, we will show them a sketch. And instead of going back to Columbus so they can finalize it and put it in the computer like a blueprint, he will want the sketch and will pass it to the manager of one of the stores in Mexico. And the next morning a thousand people will be there and changing everything the way we said.

**LD:** Oh, my gosh. Wow.

**LF:** Because in the United States or in Europe that would have taken weeks. But because help is so inexpensive in Mexico, they could do it in twenty-four hours. So they would close earlier, you know, like around nine or ten. And then all night they would make these changes, because all the adjacencies were wrong. Like chocolate was next to the underwear of women, you know.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

LF: It was just, there was no logic. You know? [Chuckles]

**LD:** Or it was twisted logic. [Laughter]

**LF:** Yes, it was like, whoa, you know. So we helped them not only to design, but we brought Retail 101, marketing strategy, everything, plus communications and stuff like that. Cleaning up the place, basically. And so when it came down to asking for more money, a raise after a year, I just went and talked to the vice president of Fitch and I said, look, I just want a finder's fee. You know, it seems fair.

**LF:** And again, they go, "Well, yes, we're just going to give you your three percent of your salary." Not the finder's fee of the three million and a half. And I was like, well, that's not what I

want. And I left. They didn't think I was going to leave. I went—get this—half a mile away from there with their competitors. They were called Retail Planning Associates [RPA]. And the reason I went to work there is because of a headhunter. For weeks she was bothering and bothering me about it. And I followed her, and we started a Latin American department there. The reason Columbus, Ohio, is really well known for retail design and stores and things like that is because The Limited has headquarters there.

LD: Oh.

LF: And if you don't know who The Limited is, you go to any mall, and they have Victoria's Secret, Limited, Abercrombie and Fitch, all these stores. They're geniuses of creating, so all these people have left and they started their own independentbusiness, or they went to work for Fitch, or for RPA. So I'm in RPA and by then I had met, a year before, this guy who thought he was a model from Mexico and he wanted to work at Fitch. He sent me his resume with a picture of himself. And everything says, "I modeled for this, I did this." He was a model; he had nothing, background, nothing in sales or anything. Well, that guy, I don't know how he got in A HISTORY there, but he was already running the show for Latin America.

**LD:** At Fitch?

**LF:** At RPA.

**LD:** Oh, at RPA. Oh!

LF: Yes. So he and I start pitching in Mexico, and in six months we got Banco Mexicano and others - we had three banks. We had the second largest retailer, Comercial Mexicana—we did a hypermarket for them—we had the largest sports department, called, oh, what's their name? I forgot. We'll come back. And they wanted a Niketown kind of concept.

LD: Yes.

LF: We needed to hire fifty people, and he and I were in charge. They paid me super well, and I was going and coming to Mexico. We opened an office in Mexico, it was just incredible. Those were the heydays. And so for four years at RPA, Retail Planning Associates, he and I would just, and everybody was jealous of us because we had so much power.

Here's a bunch of Mexicans and Latinos just running everything, and bringing in a lot of cash into that place. And out of the forty people, we were six Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, a little bit of everything. Everything we could find/

**LD:** In Columbus.

**LF:** In Columbus, Ohio. So we did very well, we did a lot of stuff there. One of the account managers from there, he was American but was raised, his mother was from Colombia, and when he was young, like twenty or something, he graduated really early. He was like a genius in math

and all that. He went to Santo Domingo to open one of the largest hotels for this investor's group from Chicago.

**LD:** In the Dominican Republic?

LF: Yes. When he finished there, we brought him in as an account manager in Columbus, Ohio. By that time, he brought his wife from the Dominican Republic. His wife was just freaking out about how cold it was in Columbus, Ohio. And he and I decided, you know, two years, three years, that's enough. We have it all. He and I were bringing the business, we were doing *everything*. Seriously. Well, with the help of all the people. So we decided to open an office, to leave Retail Planning Associates, and open an office in Miami. And we were going to specialize just in banking, financial. And the name of that company was called Strategic Hispanic Design. So we landed in Miami. Three months, we couldn't find any job.

We had a lot of requests from the banks from Latin America, but what we forgot was to do what RPA and Fitch were doing, to bring these people to your office where they see three hundred people, and then they drop the two million dollars account. We, each of us, were working from our little apartments in Miami. We had the whole identity, the whole look, and our portfolio was great/ We really did the work, but we were not RPA, we were not Fitch. And there was no hundred people working behind us. We couldn't make it. If you would have signed with us, a hundred thousand or whatever, we, easily, with freelancers we could have done it, but nobody gave us that opportunity. Banks were very safe, very conservative.

Then later I find out that he was going through a divorce with his wife and he was just not helping. And I was giving him fifty percent of everything I was doing. So I decided not to focus on banks and I started sending my portfolio, all this Mexican crazy stuff that I was doing—the less corporate, I should say—to MTV Latino, HBO Latino, Sony Latino, that all happened to be headquartered in Miami. They were just four blocks away from where I was staying. And two days later I get a phone call from MTV because I dropped a portfolio. I don't know if you want to describe it. It's basically a metal portfolio with the Carta Blanca [Carta Blanca beer bottle cap design].

**LD:** Like the bottle cap?

**LF:** The bottle cap. But before they're cut.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** A friend of mine did this in Mexico for me. I designed it a long time ago. And I put all my work in there. When MTV opened it, the brand managers and everything, they just fell in love with it.

They were just crazy about it. They call me and they say, "Hey we've got good news and bad news." I say, well, what's the good news? And they say, "The good news is that we want you to help us brand MTV Latino for twenty-three countries plus the United States. So basically for Latin America plus our lobby." And it was like a six month job, right, with ten people at least.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** And I said, wow! So what's the bad? "Well, you only have three days, because the deadline, we gave it two weeks ago and you're competing against Javier Romero," who was like God for me from Spain and New York, "and Joe Duffy from here, and Charles Anderson and Pentagram." I mean, the four of them were great! And I thought, I'm not going to make it. So I talk to my partner and say, what do I do? And he's like, "Let's do it, let's do it." So we went to our office. Our office was Kinkos!

**LD:** [Laughter]

**LF:** On Brickell Avenue. It was a brand new Kinkos, twenty-four hours open, nobody was there other than he and I. We were there twenty-four hours doing our stuff and Xeroxing everything. We would have lunch there, breakfast, everything. So we started on Thursday, we finished on a Monday, we took two big reports—I still have them—and they just went crazy and we got it.

LD: Wow.

**LF:** So we got the business. We were so wrong about the financial stuff and all that. But then again, when we finished the work, he didn't do anything. I brought the business, I did everything. He was not a creative person. He was an account person, a suit. All he did was a decent proposal. I knew how to do one and charge and manage the job that I could have done that. So he made half. I said, you know, this is not working.

So I got another headhunter calling me. Headhunters are always calling me. And I get this headhunter calling me saying there is a great position in a company in Minneapolis. They want a creative director to be part of this retail branding agency called Fame that was a division of Martin Williams, and there were like sixty people there working. I would be their creative director. And I said, Mmmm, no. I know it's cold and, you know, just no way. I'm South Beach Miami here. When they told me how much they're paying, I said "okay!" [Laughter]

**LD:** Let me reconsider. [Chuckles]

**LF:** Yes. So I came to interview and I really liked what they were doing, I liked the owners, I liked everybody. And that was it, I came here.

**LD:** And when was that, what year?

**LF:** It was in the 1990s, 1996. So yes, around 1996, I moved here. Moved to an apartment in downtown—First Avenue or First Street, I forget which one—next to the river, those big tall apartments. And I continued doing my fine art but not my freelance because there were no Latinos here. I was not aware of Latinos, at least in downtown. And there was no Internet—it was just starting, the Internet. *I* didn't have one, I should say that. I didn't know anybody who had Internet. Even if you went and looked in the Internet, if I put in "burrito" it would not come up, at that time.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** So it was just work. I would go to work—and it was just a few blocks in downtown—and then come back and start painting. I had two rooms, and in one I lived and in the other one I worked doing paintings and fine art. Basically I lasted a year there.

I was not very happy; they were not very strategic in the way I was brought up at these other companies. I didn't know that everything they were based on was more of the "wow" factor—something that I've learned but that I've never applied in my work. My work was always a little bit more brainy, more strategic. Their work was really fast. It would blow you away how fast they work and how big and realistic they will make things, but not necessarily the strategy or the numbers or proof that this was going to last. So it didn't work; it was a lot of clashes.

I was going to go back to Miami when another agency called. It was John Ryan & Company, here in town, who are considered the fathers of retail branding for financial. Now, here's the funny thing. When I was at Fitch, we did a lot of banks. And when I was in John Ryan, we even did *more* banks. So I've worked at least in close to forty banks. I mean like big projects, and each time always reinventing the wheel.

Anyway, when I was at Fitch, when we'd compete against RPA and John Ryan for banks, there was a fifty-fifty chance that we would get it. We never lost against RPA; we always lost against John Ryan. When I was at RPA and we competed against John Ryan, we always lost. There was not even a fifty-fifty chance. It was like: we will lose that project. They were *it*. So John Ryan, the man, became really, really rich in the early 1980s because he invented the bank inside of a supermarket. [Chuckles]

**LD:** That's who we have to thank. [Chuckles]

**LF:** Yes. Not only he invented it, he would not allow you to construct it or build it. *He* would do everything. So if you came to John Ryan, he would design it, implement it, do everything inside of a supermarket. And he became very, very rich. Remember on Lake Calhoun, that big, tall building, the last floor? [Lake Calhoun Executive Center in Minneapolis.]

LD: Yes.

**LF:** We were there. And when I was working, we even had the second, and the second floor was a bar.

LD: Nice.

**LF:** A really cool, big bar, just for all of us. So anyway, there was a lot of money flowing, flying around there. There were only two creative directors. I became one of them for half of the building, for everything that was the craziest stuff. And the other stuff that was conservative and more American and just rollouts, it was the other guy.

Part of my contract was to push the envelope in financial. And I knew that I was always going to get into a place doing financial where I was going to be bored. I didn't want to be in a company a year or two years, I wanted it to be at least four years. So I said, look, I'll work but I want to push the envelope. They said, "We'll put it in your contract." And they did. They were paying me a little bit more still than the other place, so they were paying me really well. I lived a block away from Lake Calhoun, from there. So I didn't even have to drive, I just walked. By that time, Carolina became my wife, and so she lived with me, and everybody was happy. At John Ryan was the place that I worked less than at any other place, because it was so easy for banks. I knew the vocabulary, I knew what they needed, and I had an incredible team that would just execute it. All I'd have to do was give them the big picture and make sure that everything was happening right.

So we got this big account, Citibank, and they brought me in. We did the future of retail banking, right, for Citibank. And we brought Kinkos and Citibank and combined them for small businesses in Las Vegas. We did this prototype. They liked it so much that they gave us Latin America, because they were having a hard time in Latin America. So we did this concept of a bank where it was more educational, like going back to school for people before you can open an account. If you wanted to open an account with Citibank you had to go through this life stage interactive kiosk that we developed that tells you where you fit in your financial life. We developed that. It was very successful. We implemented it in Argentina and Venezuela and Colombia. It was a huge, huge, multimillion dollar project. So everybody was happy. I don't want to go through my whole portfolio. These were long projects, in 1997, 1998, 1999, so I was like three years and a half there, and we did so much work.

I continued doing freelance during this time, but now with Carolina helping me with the translations and little things that I never got to do. I was doing a lot of things for Hispanic agencies in New York and L.A. who didn't have good designers, or if they had, they were not good for packaging and branding. They were good in the corporate sense but not for other things. So I was doing a lot of freelance and I was doing well in that and I was very happy. And again, I continued to win awards on a national level with the Latino stuff and not with the corporate stuff.

If you go back and see my articles and magazines, they were interesting in the Latino aspect and not in the Anglo aspect. So it was like, oh man, I've got to follow my instincts. And 1999 comes, and the U.S. Census comes out with the new numbers. For the first time in history, Latinos—something that we knew, we'd read it and everything, but until the government says it, it's not correct, right? They said that the Latino population in the U.S. has surpassed the African-American. So finally, it's like this is what I've got to do!

LD: Yes.

**LF:** And during that same week I saw a magazine—one of those magazines, *People en Español* or *Latina Magazine*—with my doctor, when you're waiting. And I saw ads from Target in Spanish that, they were not bad, but they were not good. But definitely the writing was wrong.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**LF:** Or the translation of the writing. The copy was not correct, and I don't mean misspelled. Grammatically it was wrong. And they were saying things in a Puerto Rican way and not, I don't want to say you have to say it in a Mexican way, but they were not saying it in universal Spanish at least.

**LD:** Right.

**LF:** And so I told Carolina we should send our portfolio there just to get more freelance work. She goes, "Just stop it. I'm not . . ." But, you know, I have *time* weekends. And so I sent—I don't have it with me—this little book. It was just crazy. It was pink fluffy material. Hot pink, right. And I sent it to them with *all* of the cool stuff that I'd been doing as a freelancer. They just went *crazy*. They needed ten more. So I submitted ten more and then they just called me one day and said, "Do you want to do this project?" Yes. So that project—it was a little freelance—paid *half* of my salary from the other place.

**LD:** [Whistles]

**LF:** And I was like, wow! And we did it in a week, Carolina and I, we did it so fast. It was so easy. Because they were treating us as an advertising agency, not as a graphic designer. They didn't know better.

LD: Nice.

**LF:** Yes. And so then they asked me, "Do you want another one like this?" And I said, "yes!" And I just told John Ryan that that was it. This is exactly when Mercado Central was starting.

I met the whole committee, and they said, "You should open your office over here." And that's what we did. So we opened the office on the second floor on the southeast corner. I'm being very specific because I had windows looking at the parking lot. And for me, it was the first time that I was designing for a demographic where I could see them. I never had designed and seen my customers or my group of people that I'm designing for *there*.

LD: Yes. Right.

**LF:** It was just incredible, because I used have the twenty-sixth floor when I was at Fame, a corner, all I saw were these other big buildings and very corporate, but I didn't see who I was designing for. Here, I see them. And they come in, and I can go downstairs in the *panadería* [bakery] and *la carnicería* [the butcher shop]. Everything was there. I can even take something downstairs and say, do you like it, do you hate it? It was a lab! It was an incredible lab. It was just *happening* at the right moment. So we became the media darlings for the two years that we were there because of the census.

The governor [Governor Jesse Ventura] came to Mercado Central. Senator Paul Wellstone came there, everybody. All the politicians, everybody who's who, everybody wanted to see what the hell was this Mercado Central all about. And yes, they would get answers, but their questions were even, furthermore, why are Mexicans here? Why this? And nobody could answer that other

than this agency that was upstairs. They would go and knock on the doors, and they were just so impressed with the office. There was a contrast between what they saw downstairs when they went around with us, and they would sit down and talk about it. The governor, before going to Mexico, stopped by because he wanted to understand the culture and whatnot. He saw my wrestling collection and he just went crazy because he used to be a wrestler. It was like, "Oh, my god, you know this?!" And so the last thing we talked about was his trip. And MPR [Minnesota Public Radio]—all the media was there documenting this. He just went crazy with my wrestling collection. And I'm a big fan, since I was a kid, of wrestling. I used to live two blocks away from the sports arena for wrestling in Mexico, in Tijuana. And so I met the golden years of wrestlers.

I have pictures with them when I was a kid and just, everything. I have their masks and everything. So he couldn't believe it because he was a big fan of Mexican wrestling, too. He told me that he did a movie with Arnold Schwarzenegger and all these people in Puerto Vallarta. The movie was *Predator*. So it was him, there was Wellstone, and then we were in the newspapers and we were on the radio and we were on the television. We didn't have to go to them. I mean, it was probably half a million dollars in press that we got.

For me it was a really good decision to open the office there. I didn't plan to go there. I just thought it was appropriate to go there. I, very, very easily, with the money that we were making, could have gone to where everybody else went downtown. But to be there was the best decision that we made. One, because we were so connected with this new community that was just happening then. Most of them were recent arrivals. And ninety percent were Mexicans, so we clearly understood them. But we were doing this, this corporate America thing, you know. We were working directly with Target. And so we knew each project, we were not disconnected, I guess. We were just right where it was happening. It was very accessible for us for research or focus groups or anything like that. Because that was the majority of the people that corporations wanted to hit.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** Not second or third generation. But *that* market.

LD: Right.

LF: And mainly Mexicans. Not Puerto Ricans, not Cubans, not Argentineans, but Mexicans.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** And not just Mexicans with high income or a level of acculturation that is high, but recent immigrants. So it was like . . .

LD: Perfect.

LF: Super perfect.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** It there was a big lab, and I saw how they dressed, I saw how they react, I saw how every day three people always forgot their keys inside of the car.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**LF:** Every day three people would forget their keys in the car. They were Mexicans. Why we never did research [laughter] we never knew why. My theory is that they were very worried and they had too many things in their heads. That was my theory. And they were, obviously, undocumented—I'm generalizing here. Something had to, it was just too much coincidence. I'm not exaggerating, at least one, but up to three a day. And I would see this because my window was right next to the parking lot. So it was really, really interesting. And so for us it was really easy to hire talent. We did hundreds of radio ads with people from Mercado Central, real talent.

LD: Oh!

**LF:** I would put a little ad up downstairs and, you know, and people would come. It was like, "I *sing*, and I do *this!*" And so we would pick the right voice, the right attitude, the right talent. These were unprofessional people and we were paying them like professionals.

LD: Wow.

**LF:** We would coach them. Then the daughters who wanted to be models, everybody. We have it all. You know, it's documented in national print advertising, so we were doing eight-page inserts for *Latina* and *People en Español*, the two largest magazines in the United States for the Latino population, with people from Minnesota as the talent.

**LD:** Oh, my gosh.

**LF:** And the people from Mercado Central. And nobody knew this! We were saving a lot of money by not going to Miami or New York, for focus groups, for modeling, for even translations and everything. We just, Carolina and I would decide that these are the right people, it's the right thing, and it just looks real and this is it. So that's how we worked. We just did it that way. That was the positive. The negative was that we were at Mercado Central.

And so what's negative about it? It is that I couldn't, if we were going to continue working with corporate America, I couldn't bring the vice president or the creative director of these companies to Mercado Central, to my office where the bathroom wall was outside. And when he wanted to go to the bathroom, he needed to fight with the guy who was shooting heroin or a cholo giving some gang signs and telling him to get out of the bathroom!

LD: Yes.

**LF:** He's freaking out. So I'd say, well, you wanted the real stuff, here it is! [Laughter]

**LD:** There you go.

**LF:** He'd say, well, not that real. At least the bathroom needs to be safe - and he was right. Or the parking lot—they were afraid of parking. And so that was the *other* side of it. It was hard for us and we had to make the decision to leave after two years because of that. Not because we sold out and not because we became more American, just simply because it was hard. That, and the people from Mercado Central, the neighbors and everything. If we were working from nine to six, three to four hours of those hours of working was just *chismeando* [gossiping].

### **LD:** [Chuckles]

**LF:** People would come in, and it was just *chisme* [gossip], *el cafecito* [coffee], *el panecito* [roll] and the bakery, and it was just, it was the place to hang out. You know it was because because they didn't see what we did. They didn't understand. You come into an office, you're sitting at a computer, you don't look like you're working.

## **LD:** Right. [Chuckles]

**LF:** Everybody else and their cousins have this real stuff that they work; they cut, they do tortillas, they do bakery, they're always busy. With us, it didn't look like we were busy. But we were *busy*. Even if we were on the phone, we were closing the deal, whatever it is. And these people didn't understand that.

#### LD: Yes.

**LF:** We're very nice, and we didn't know how to kick them out of our office. [Laughter] So that was one part. The other part was that these ladies, our neighbors, would come in. At one point we had the doors open. Now we close them, but not locked. So still these people, they saw it and they would just come *in*. Without knocking. There's no problem. So they would come in. They would interrupt my meeting. Interrupt the meeting, interrupt everybody. And they'd ask me if I could make a copy. I said, we don't do copies. "So what is what you do?" they asked me. [Laughing] So I had to explain what we did, right. And they would get all mad because they saw the copier. They were right; there was a copier machine. But I did not allow them to make a copy because then they would tell somebody else and everybody would come. I said, no, you've got to go to Kinkos. "¿Qué es esto? [What is this?]"It's like this place where they specialize in making copies. We don't do copies!

# **LD:** [Laughter]

**LF:** And so it was just *crazy*. They said, "What exactly do you do?" So I had to explain to them. See this poster? I did it. And they would go, "What exactly did you do? Do you print it?" No, I hire a printer. "Oh, so you write it?" No, that person over there or somebody in Florida or wherever did the writing. "Oh, so you took the picture?" No, a photographer took the picture. "Oh, so the little logo illustration that is . . .?" No, that was given to us. "So what the hell do you do?" I said, I'm the guy who put it all together, and that's what we did. So they didn't, you know, it was just too much for them. I've got more examples, but I don't want to even go there. It was just the right time to leave.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** So we put in two years there with the community and we moved on. And we had the chance to buy this after, we always wanted to go and ask the bank the first two years for money, but they didn't give it to us because they didn't believe in us. And we were making a *lot* of money the first three years. I mean, an incredible amount of money for the overhead that we had. And so we wanted to buy things, invest, because we were giving it back to Uncle Sam.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** But we didn't want to use our cash, we wanted to start using credit and banks and all this stuff. Banks said, no, you're not a corporation until you have three or four years. You know, we didn't have enough information on our books. Anyway, after four years we decided to buy this. We had a month to decide what we wanted to do. And so we decided as an investment to buy it and we're happy here. We're in the middle of everything.

**LD:** Can I ask you, why did you call it UNO?

**LF:** There was no really particular reason. I wanted to keep it short. That was one thing. I said, I needed to keep it short. I need people in Spanish to Everybody understands. But, more importantly, I wanted Americans to understand it.

LD: Okay.

LF: And what's the first thing you learn?

**LD:** Uno [one].

**LF:** Right. Dos, tres [two, three] the numbers! Right. I said, well, it's short and simple. And it's not a negative. Zero is negative. Uno is like, ohhh, number one.

LD: Number one.

**LF:** And that was it. There was no real reason, I knew exactly that I didn't want it to be Luis Fitch Design or Fitch Design. I couldn't even if I wanted be Fitch Design, because of those other guys.

**LD:** You'd already been there! [Chuckles]

**LF:** Yes. Been there, done that! I wanted anything other than my name. Because I wanted design and communications. It's about a group of people.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** I don't think it's just me, personally. And I always give credit to the group of people who work with me, and the bigger the better. The best stuff that I've ever done has been in groups of people and not me, individually. And so I knew that I didn't want to put my name on the building.

**LD:** So, on the one side, you're doing the corporate thing and you're developing your own business. On the other side, I know that you've also been very heavily involved with your own fine art and the community of Latino artists here in Minnesota. Tell me a little bit about that. Because at first you said the words that there seemed to be no Latinos here [chuckles] and you didn't know who or where they were.

**LF:** You're right, yes.

**LD:** So how did you connect with them?

**LF:** By going to the right places. Even before I got married, we were going to these salsa places that I, personally, don't like salsa. Remember, I grew up with rock and roll, progressive.

**LD:** Led Zeppelin. [Chuckles]

**LF:** Yes! So for me to go salsa is really different, but that was the only places that Latinos were hanging. And there was a place, I remember, in St. Paul. I forget the name. It was *the* place and it was the only place, so I would go over there and it was all these old people. And it was like, no man, this is not hip, this is not me. And I would just go back do paintings. But, little by little, it was like there was this Chicano empowerment arts thing happening. Years, years back. It was my first or second year. And they invited me to give a presentation there to the kids. And I went and showed my art—not design, but just my fine art. And they loved it. This is when you used slides, I had to present slides.

And in the other room there's this guy, Alejandro Trujillo, who's my *compadre* now. So we met and it's like we go for a beer and this and that. And then we met another guy, Gustavo. And then Gustavo met someone else, and suddenly there was twenty of us and we started a group called Latino Artists Group. We started getting money from everybody; we started having shows *everywhere*. It became like a monster. We were five and it became like up to a hundred people. It was just amazing - and this is before Facebook. [Laughter] It was just incredible. We used to throw parties and everything, it was really good times. We all got bored, and you can't have too many Latino artists. We all, each of us, have our own ego and it's just so big that you go there and we can't fit in a room.

LD: [Chuckles]

**LF:** So sooner or later it had to explode, and it exploded. And each person went their own way. And that's where we are, you know, we're getting old and each person is doing their own thing. But since then, there hasn't been, you know, a group of individuals . . .

LD: Anything.

**LF:** You've got the poetry going on and all that.

**LD:** Yes, but a group like that. It has been very difficult to maintain.

**LF:** Yes. And we've got the tools now. But more importantly, you know, I wish there was a CreArte [Chicano Latino Arts Center and Museum], to be honest.

**LD:** Yes. Explain a little bit, CreArte.

**LF:** When I first came here, I saw this *ugly* poster for Day of the Dead. It was like, wow man, Day of the Dead. So I go and I see this show. And I see Gustavo again there and I met Maya Santamaria there. Basically, CreArte was a cultural center. It was part of Intermedia Arts—that's where they started. Armando Gutierrez G. was heading it. And I'd say, hey man, I'm a graphic designer, I want to redo this next year. And he said, "Yes, who are you?" You know. So I show him my work and he's blown away. He's like, "Yes, let's do it." So in two days I'm going to have the ten year show. And I'm opening with his poster that I did there, the first poster for Day of the Dead in Minnesota. Like with money.

LD: [Chuckles]

**LF:** He got money and Maya brought in the proposal. And with my graphics, we got money to brand us. And I think it was the first one. So it's really cool that we did that. And I remember that being on the cover of *La Prensa*, by the way.

**LD:** Yes. [Chuckles]

LF: You know. And I still have it, I still have those things. And so it just suddenly just happened, we all clicked and came together and there was this, I don't want to say clash, but there was finally first and second generations of Latinos like Maya and Armando with these new arrivals of Latinos who were educated or semi-educated, or as a hobby we have fine arts. We were not here because of immigrants trying to find work; we were here because we already had work and were educated. So suddenly there is a wave of that. And it was great. But you know how it is. You get twenty Mexicans together and the non-acculturated are going to be on one side and the semi-acculturated or the educated or the Chicanos are going to be over there, and the non-Chicanos are over here and the Mexicans from the north are going to be over there, and the Mexicans from the south are going to be over here, and we all really hate each other [chuckles].

So it lasted five years. They were a great five years. CreArte didn't continue, because CreArte needed Latino artists and we were the new Latino artists and we called the shots, not the director of the place. And so it disappeared. But now I wish, now that we're all more mature and I think we have more experience, that we need to do it—not for us—but for this younger generation. If El Colegio [a charter high school in south Minneapolis for Latino students] hadn't existed, El Colegio started with Armando and the other two people because of that.

Now you have these younger kids who are half my age—more than half my age, they're eighteen, seventeen—who have no idea that we existed or you exist. Or *La Prensa*—or who started *La Prensa*—nothing. And they're just there, kind of like in limbo when it comes to art and culture, with one foot here and the other one over there. And they don't know what's going on. I think we need to come together and do a new CreArte, an institution. But not just visually, but where there's music, theater, like a *casa la cultura*, a real cultural house. But people say to us, "No, we're in a recession. There's no money." No, it's the other way. Latinos have more power than ever, and I'll tell you why. The money will come from corporations. Just like they wanted to advertise when we first started. Target didn't have one person, when I was working there, who knew the market.

LD: Wow.

**LF:** Now they have probably two hundred, three hundred people who understand Latino markets. There are well-educated Latinos there at different levels. And they have this club, the Target Latino Club, that's probably five hundred people, at corporate headquarters.

**LD:** Really. Wow.

**LF:** So anywhere from marketers to translators to web developers, everything, to photographers, they're all Latinos.

LD: Wow.

LF: You go to General Mills, they have another five hundred. You go to Best Buy, they have a thousand. You go to Medtronic, they've got a hundred. You go to 3M, they've got four hundred. These are people who are well-educated, with a lot of money, that need to come together to a cultural center because it's the Latino Film Festival, because it's the Latino Poetry Night, because we brought this band or this alternative thing or this exhibition. Because we connected with the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago to bring that show here. Now we have the power, we have the experience, and it will not be kind of small and grassroots. We've got the most important thing: the people, the experience and the corporate dollars that they have to put into it. But everybody's thinking about the money. It's like, I mention it to [fellow artist, Douglas] Padilla, and it's like, Padilla, let's do something. And he says, "Yes, but I don't want to give up my fine art." And same with me, I don't want to give up my design to do it. I said no, that's not how we would do it now. There are people who went to school to *study* this.

LD: Yes.

LF: For example, Maria Cristina Tavera, that's what she studied. She can become the administrator, and we'd pay her whatever she needed so she can drop what she's doing and focus on this. And we'd become board members and we—not just the artists—we'd bring corporate people, the vice presidents and people, the Latinos from Best Buy and all these places, to become part of the board members. And we'd make this thing happen, not for us, but for the next generation. My son who's eight, who, you know, in ten more years will be eighteen.

We have it everywhere. We have it in L.A., we have it in Denver, we have it everywhere you go, in New York, everywhere. We've got a Mexican Consulate here in Minnesota, and still we don't have a cultural center.

**LD:** So is this your mission? Because one of my questions here, kind of wrapping up, is that, you know, you've had an incredible career. What do you do next and what's your next challenge? Is that one of a . . .?

**LF:** Yes, it's, at least I wanted to brainstorm it and bring it to different people. And it's funny because NALAC [National Association of Latino Arts and Culture]—did I pronounce it correctly? Abroigh

LD: Yes.

**LF:** It's going to come here.

**LD:** I'm performing!

**LF:** Oh, good! Well, they invited me for the closing statements.

**LD:** Yes, yes. We'll be there together then.

LF: It's not a coincidence. Things happen for a reason. And so it's interesting that it's happening here, the regional meetings, and that we're all going. We're all going to see our faces again there. And this is going to be the same people that I've been talking about the last fifteen years that I've been here. And let's see what happens out of it, you know. I talked to Armando Gutierrez and we've got to do our new CreArte. It doesn't have to be called CreArte, but it's that concept. And he says, "I'm all for it." He's ready for it. It's just finding the right people, and everybody getting paid, that's the thing.

**LD:** So what else? What other projects or other things are there that motivate you, that?

LF: All new projects motivate me, to be honest. Lately, I would say that eighty percent of our work is for the Latino market and the other twenty is for the general market. That twenty percent, you never see it.

You will never see it on our website, you never see it in articles. We never even talk about it, because it's for the general market. And I don't want to promote the fact that I do that. I do it with people who come to me and say, "We know you can do it." And so we're doing these big projects that are really, really interesting and really, really fun, that have nothing to do with the Latino market. And it's sad, because people see us as UNO, and I think in the last two years it's, I don't want to say it's been taken over by this other Anglo stuff, general market stuff, but the Latino projects are not as big as they used to be. And that's because all these corporations now have the right talent. There's no reason to go out for it. They brought it in.

**LD:** Right.

LF: And so who knows what's going to happen, how many years we're going to continue lasting with this just focusing and promoting this, the Latino thing. But each two years we seem to be changing. We never told anybody that we were an advertising agency, but they treated us as an advertising agency. So yes, "Do you do radio?" Yes, we do. (I've never done radio – now I've got two hundred radio spots.) "Do you do television?" (I've never done television.) Yes, we do television. Do you do this...? Yes. So we did things that we never knew, but because we were very professional in what we do, we're very responsible, we just went out and did it, and it was successful. We were able to put metrics against it, we were able to measure it, give results to what they wanted to do. But we always balanced it with community and a little mom and pop work. And to me it was those two things. I almost feel like, you know, Robin Hood, stealing from corporate America to donate some pro bono time for the Mercado Central kind of projects. But at the same time, the Mercado Central, it's given me these ten years of shows of the posters.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** Now they want to buy the whole collection. And now the Minnesota Historical Society museum wants the collection.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** They're getting the collection. So things happen. I'd call it good karma, you know. You donate something here and other things happen. And because of that, now they want a graphic design show. Not just posters, they want a whole graphic design show at these universities. People say, "Oh yes, I've heard of you or this. Oh, this is you?" Once you are in the context of an environment in a museum or a gallery, it's even more powerful, and more things happen. So I think because we're in our ten years, we've been wanting to do a book, documenting a book. Hired two or three people out there to do our *ensayo* or . . .

LD: Essay.

**LF:** Essay, thank you. So they can encapsulate, not necessarily our work, but 1999-2010, what happened in those ten years here in Minnesota. I'm more interested in that than anything else. I've been giving a lot of presentations around the United States and Mexico in the last three years. I'm giving one on Day of the Dead, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, at MCAD [Minneapolis College of Art and Design].

That is the first time they invited me after so many years here, and after me hiring so many designers from there. [Chuckles] And it's the first time that somebody pays me to give a talk. So that's really interesting! [Chuckles] We never ask for money. And definitely, if it's a school, we never ask, but they just said, "Here." It's like, wow, okay, cool. So we're going to give it back to them in one way or another. It seems like everything is coming in full circle.

**LF:** Now we need to do something out there that is different. I even did things that I never thought I was going to do, like product development. I've been doing a lot of licensing and stuff like that. I'm doing very well with that. But I want to do something at the level of El Colegio, and I don't know what it is. Or something where my kid can go to this gallery and it's not necessarily from an Anglo perspective or necessarily from a Mexican perspective, but from a Latino perspective. You know, that can be really, really interesting - at least to be involved in it.

**LD:** Yes. Talk to me, what would that essay say? Because I mean you have a really unique perspective on all of the changes that Minnesota's Latino community has gone through.

LF: Yes.

LD: So, you know, from 2000 to 2010. What would that essay say?

LF: I don't know. That why I need the writers! [Laughter]

**LD:** Okay, well, what are some of the main points? What are some of the things that you've seen?

LF: Well, yes. Well, here's an area of Minnesota, East Lake Street, that was run by prostitutes and crack dealers and wannabe little gangs and mafia and all that. And then you get these recent arrival immigrants, hard workers, investing in sweat equity and just working really hard. And bringing the rest of their families and renting the apartments that were so inexpensive because nobody wanted to live in that area. They work at fixing the inside of the apartment, to fixing the outside, to asking the owners if they want to sell that building to them. And they are buying it and bringing the rest of their families and buying the block next to it. The turn of things that happened in East Lake Street in less than five years, it was incredible. I saw at least five people become millionaires on East Lake Street.

LD: Oh!

**LF:** Four of them being Mexican immigrants, one from Guatemala and one an Arab. And it's because they believed in this. And they did malls and they did restaurants and some other people did *envíos* [transfers] to send money back home. And so it's the American dream in less than ten years, in less than ten blocks, that I saw it and I was part of it. And the amount of influx of families that came here, it was tremendous. Minneapolis is the number ten city with more growth of Latinos than any other place, more than L.A., more than Chicago, more than New York.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** And the weird places are Minneapolis, Little Rock, Arkansas, and Nevada being number one. But you think, why Nevada, with Las Vegas, why? Well, who else is behind the kitchen, who else is cleaning those huge hotels, who else is in the garden and whatnot. It's the same here, why Minneapolis? Well, it's a safe zone in a way, you know. So far we haven't been attacked so much like in Phoenix I think we all know who are those people, and who did what, and we can go back to the census, but that's just part of it. There were so many invisible other people, you

know, the undocumented people. They were not part of the census and they really paid taxes and whatnot. And with that, there was this boom. Not everything was rosy and beautiful. Other people from Chicago and L.A. and their friends of their friends say, "That's where it's at, let's go." And so you bring the bad stuff to you. And so now we have gangs, just like it used to be, but now they're Latino gangs. [Chuckles]

And they don't see the big picture. They didn't see what other people went through to make that what it is. And so it was easy for them to come to the neighborhoods and be part of it. And it's easy to, you know, to go out and become a gang member in an area that is almost a safe zone, it's so Mexican. If you're Latino, in less than ten blocks you can go into a church, they speak Spanish, you can go to a bodega, they speak Spanish, you can go to a clinic. They feed you, you can go to schools, you can go anywhere and it's a small Latino world. And this is where the hard workers are - the first ones who came here. And just like in the 1940s and 1930s in the West Side, it was the same thing. But it was part of what I experienced in my little lab up there, you know. So I think it would say something like that. We've just got to be careful now. You know, what's going to happen with these people? A lot of those rich multimillionaire people have lost everything, too. And I don't know if they lost it because they hadn't had an education and they never knew how to manage the money. I don't know if they lost it because they just went crazy with real estate and they didn't know what was going on. And the whole real estate just exploded and that was it. But yes, now it's a struggle for everybody.

### LD: Yes.

**LF:** And more for the Latino community. And more for those people who had it all and then suddenly you don't have it, it's got to be even worse, you know.

The focus needs to be the education for the younger generation, and us telling these kids that there's no other easy way, you know, other than what Cheech Marin would call the great equalizer. Going back to school and having these new generations not fall in the same things, but learn with our support, the people who have a little bit and understand the culture, where they come from, without forgetting where they are.

You know, there's nothing wrong being Mexican-American or whatever-American. But I think the education is going to be one of those few things that really make a difference. I know that if I would have not had the education, I would have been less than what I am. I would have visited fewer parts of the world, and I wouldn't have the chance to create the dreams that I always had. Each year I say, I want to do this and do that, and they become reality because I can visualize and because I set goals that are reachable.

But it was all because of Art Center. And Art Center was all because of City College. And City College was all because of Escuela Numero Uno and that was because of my mom. And everything was because of San Diego, L.A., Tijuana. And so UNO, in what we do, couldn't have been what it is if I would have been raised somewhere else, like in Mexico City or Guadalajara. It just would have been a different me, and a different UNO. So it's really, really interesting now. And it's got to be the right years, got to be the right city, the right school, the right group of people. If not, it's not the same.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** Every year we say we're going to leave, we're going to go back to L.A., we're going to go to San Diego, and every year we're here. We continue to be here. And it's just that we have roots here, we have a kid who's from here. He says that he's from Minneapolis in Minnesota and he likes Minnesota. He's an American that happens to have two parents that happen to be from Mexico. He happens to like enchiladas the same way he likes his spaghetti, he likes a burger.

So who knows if we're ever going to leave. But if we're not going to leave, I want to do something that is like bigger than UNO. And because I like working with other people, to do something bigger than UNO, it requires having more people involved. And the bigger the dream, the more challenge it's going to be. And I think this new thing - it could be multicultural, it could be just Latino, but I think through the arts we can do so much for other people to get to know who we are. And it doesn't matter about the socio-economic level or country of origin, people can come to this place and have something that we have all in common, and leave something also, I think, for other generations. I guess I used the example of the Chicago museum - the National Museum of Mexican Art. It's been doing so well. It's one of the most successful ones. It's like, use that model, whatever they did that it was right, and bring it here.

You know, a lot people think that we don't know how to read, a lot of people think that we don't have an education, and in some points that might be right. But that's the reason we've got to do it. Because those people have a culture, even if they don't know how to read or how to write. And then those who think they're very sophisticated, they can come and see our movies, they can come see our exhibitions. I think we need it. We need something like that.

**LD:** Yes. That might be your next thing.

**LF:** Yes. Or at least for me to be involved with it, because I've never done that. I don't even know how. I don't have the slightest idea how to do it. But at least if I do the branding I'll be happy, you know. [Chuckles] And if I'm part of the board of directors, I'll be happy.

**LD:** I have this picture in my head of the work that you were doing as an eighteen year old in Tijuana with the gate, the border.

**LF:** [Laughs]

**LD:** And the solitary door that just says, welcome or *bienvenidos*.

**LF:** Yes, yes, yes. It was in both languages. It was in English and Spanish.

**LD:** You know, I think that might be, you know, kind of a metaphor for what you've done in your work, is to really open the door for people. And maybe this is another way to do that.

LF: Yes, yes.

**LD:** Just kind of open the door across a border. So is there anything else that you would like to talk about? We've covered a lot, I know.

**LF:** Well, I don't want to talk too much about our work or anything.

**LD:** Maybe just you, kind of personally. What are the things that have brought you satisfaction and, you know, where do you want to go? Thinking about your child, etcetera.

**LF:** Yes. Well, satisfaction, obviously, that I'm independent. I wish I would have done it before. But I'll tell you what the problem is. And this is where my focus is, so this will be an interesting story here. Art Center trained me to be a kick ass designer. And not just me, everybody who graduates from there just, they have really great opportunities to go out there. But they never trained us to be independent. They trained us to have a great resume, great portfolio, and go to work for somebody else.

I wish Art Center, or *any* other school for that matter, trained us to be independent and to understand the business side of whatever you're doing. So that you can hire other people or do it by yourself or develop your own products or become your own boss. I think even in the big schools here, you know, they train you to go and work for somebody. Everybody wants to go to Target or General Mills or 3M and they're *happy* there. And that's it. You're working for somebody else.

#### LD: Yes.

LF: Carolina and I were very pleased, but we have struggled because we were not trained. We don't have MBAs. We didn't know how to do accounting. But we learned fast. We lost a lot of money and we learned fast. We didn't know how to do human resources, you know. [Chuckles] But we learned fast and we know how to hire them and how to be respectful in the work environment. So you just learn, but I wish I would have learned all that, because then I would have never gone to Fitch and RPA and all those places. I wasted a lot of time doing my own thing. But there's got to be a reason why. And I think the reason is that now I'm teaching my son to think as an independent person and become very entrepreneurial. And the guy will sell you anything!

### LD: [Laughs]

LF: He is like, incredible! He will throw the trash for me and ask me for his allowance and he will not forget, and gets his five bucks. He puts one for the ice cream, one for books, one for toys and one for savings. And he knows where to put the dollar and he knows what's going on with his money. He knows more about money than I knew when I was fifteen, sixteen. Right now, and he's only eight. And so it's really, really cool. Yesterday he blew us away because he has ninety percent books in English. It's all science and robots and stuff. But he has this other ten percent from Carolina's and my family. He receives books in Spanish. So once in a while by mistake he pulls one and he's like, oh, well, let's read it. Yesterday he started reading in Spanish. And it was a paragraph and I would say eighty percent was correct, phonetically correct.

LD: Wow.

LF: The other twenty was struggling, but I helped him. But this is the first time he's read in Spanish. He's never taken Spanish classes or anything. So today we put him in Spanish classes. We didn't want him to, we wanted him to learn English perfectly. But two days ago the teacher told us that his English is superior to the rest of the kids. And we said, "Well, yes, he's American." But she keeps saying, "Yes, but his English is better." And so I said, "Is it better because we're Mexicans? Why is it better?" "No, no, no. You're not understanding me. His words are a lot better than anybody else. He picks perfect words and he understands them, how to use them." We said, "Well, yes, he's been reading since he was three or four. And he reads always ahead, you see, so it's not a book for a three year old kid, it's for a five or six year old." And that's his thing, you know.

And what's cool that he has is that he has his mom who comes from a really good family, a very traditional family and very well educated. And then he has his father, who came from the streets of Tijuana, who teaches him all the bad words and how to . . . you know, how to survive, [chuckles] to get away from the bullies, and how to be cool, and then how to back off at the right time, and how to sell things and how to make a quick buck. So he's balancing these two worlds. The traditional stuff from mom and the hardcore, if you want, from the father, and mixing in his own reality, his own world. Then he has the Minnesota culture and the U.S. culture going on and a decent neighborhood that he lives in. Then we take him to Tijuana in a really bad neighborhood, or to Oaxaca for a month or two months with the little kids who are selling, you know, whatever, and become his friends.

So it is this contrast that I'm really big on, high/low, what's north, what's south and putting them outside. All these things I put inside of his head and he gets it. And he's questioning it and he's all up for it. He thinks that what we do is crazy. Marketing and design, he's like, "Give me a break." He's not against it, but he knows that that's a joke.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** He understands it. He knows when he's being marketed. He gets it like that. [Snaps fingers] It's like, "No way." He starts laughing with the ads. [Chuckles] Seriously, he's so smart with that, because he's been here. This is his TV. He sits here and he watches all this stuff and he just makes a joke.

LD: [Chuckles]

**LF:** Some of this stuff was designed by him.

LD: Oh, really?

**LF:** He would tell me what he likes and what he thinks is right and I would just execute it. So it's really interesting because he's a lot more hip when it comes to the latest cartoons or what's cool and what's not, what are the kids collecting. And he will say, "Papi, that drawing is so, it sucks."

**LD:** [Laughs]

**LF:** I said, what part of it sucks? "It's too Mexican." And what he means by that, is it's too traditional. I'm going backwards. I'm not going forward. He's pushing me to do stuff like that for him. He's a Mexican-American eight years old, in 2010, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. And at school most of the kids are white, but half of them speak Spanish because their parents have houses in Mexico.

**LD:** Wow. Well, [chuckles] I think we've run the gamut.

LF: Yes, good.

**LD:** Is there anything else?

**LF:** No, I don't know. What else can you talk about? [Laughter] It's good to finish with him because he is the future, he is what's coming. He is the reason we're here, you know. We're doing a huge project for General Mills. It's a magazine that they needed to rebrand because they were off, they were going all over the place. They wanted to make it really cool and hip, very Miami. And they finally went back and they said, "No, our roots are the Latina mom who's sacrificed to be here, to have their kids get a better education."

And that is the bottom line for us. That's the reason to believe in all the stuff that we're doing. And that is the key thing. That's our reason to believe why we are here. And we don't want to go to L.A. or San Diego. We're getting used to it. We don't have real roots here. Because we don't have family here, it makes it difficult for the three of us, you know. We wish we had more family. And our neighborhood is the type of neighborhood that if somebody is walking down the street everybody is in the window looking. There's no people walking, it's just really anti-Latino in that sense, because I grew up in places where there were cars and people and everything. My son has to only play in the backyard, he can't play in the front without us being there. We would be afraid that something is going to happen. And so it's the American way, but in a bad way and in a different way. And we've just got to be more conscious about him and his surroundings now. So yes, there are positives and negatives. It's just, you know, part of life.

**LD:** Do you think that if you were to participate in some way with the creation of a cultural house that that would be more of a sense of family or?

**LF:** I don't know. I mean, again, there are always egos with other artists. So it needs to be done very carefully. It's got to be a nice chemistry and everybody needs to be at the same level. I think that's part of our requirement, people have to really understand what family is and why you're doing it. You know, you're doing it for your kid.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** And for this other generation. You can't just think you're doing it because you're going to have a show there or because they might give you five thousand dollars to do an exhibit.

**LD:** Right.

LF: Once everybody has the same goal, it is like, boom. Corporate America is going to be all over that. Because I know we can do a killer presentation. I know we can have people who can put the right blueprints financially for what we need; I know we can bring incredible shows from Latin America and from Mexico and from everywhere. And I know we can have education and curriculums now that somebody locally can design specially. I know we can make a living out of kids having to go there on Cinco de Mayo, Day of the Dead, Independence Day, all these other celebrations that we have. I know we can have parties for General Mills so they can introduce their first Latino yogurt flavor. We've just got to think bigger and go for it. They need a place like that. Of all places, this is the place. I don't think New York can do that, I don't think Chicago can do that, because of who's here. And not just us, but we need the sponsorship, you know.

LD: Yes.

**LF:** And it's not like begging. They will get what they're looking for out of us, too. Because through art you see things, you know. And that was the double whammy that we had. When we were at Mercado Central, we had what I call this business advantage that nobody else had. Yes, there were bigger agencies than us, and all over the United Stated there were people who have won more awards for their television ads, all this stuff. But nobody, nobody had their office in a place like Mercado Central.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

LF: You know what I'm saying?

LD: Yes, I do!

**LF:** And that was the people. That was where it's happening.

**LD:** It is all about the community.

LF: And if you were doing a service about sending money home—we did like three of those projects for banks—I would just take them to that place, to Don Joaquin. And Don Joaquin would tell me, "Yes, this is how we do it and this is how many people come in." There was all the information they needed to know was right there. They needed to pay ten thousand dollars and a consultant, you know, for that. That was right there. They needed to know what's the next food, and we'd go down there, to the baker. They needed to know how to do tacos, we would go there. You know, how to do tortillas. It's like, food, music, art, culture, everything was inside there. And it was by the real people, not by focus groups or all this stuff. It was the real stuff, you know, and it's really incredible. Now we've just got to do something for the other generation.

**LD:** Yes. Well, thank you so much on behalf of the Historical Society. Again, I know you're very busy, and this is very valuable for us and for the people of Minnesota. So thank you once again.

LF: Thank you for the invitation.

