

Héctor García
Narrator

Lorena Duarte
Interviewer

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

Héctor García - **HG**
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

LD: Today is Monday, February 14, 2011. My name is Lorena Duarte. I'm here with Héctor García in his office in Saint Paul, Minnesota. I will be conducting the interview for the Minnesota Historical Society's Latino Oral History Project.

First of all, Héctor, thank you. I know you're very busy. Thank you for taking the time to share your history with us. If we could start off with your name and how to spell it, please.

HG: Sure. Thank you, Lorena. It's an honor for me to be interviewed for this project.

My name is Hector Garcia, or in, Spanish Héctor García without pronouncing the H.

LD: Wonderful. Could you give us your date of birth and your occupation?

HG: It's September 17, 1943, and I'm the executive director of the Minnesota Chicano Latino Affairs Council [CLAC].

LD: Great. If we could start off by you telling us a little bit about where you were born and a little bit about your family, the names of your parents and siblings.

HG: I was born in Mexico and grew up in Mexico City. I studied there. I'll give you more details about that. My parents have both passed away. My mother was Elena Islas. It's interesting that her grandfather was Italian. Then, my father was León García, who was a politician. He was a senator in Mexico City, and then he had a difference of opinion with the president at the time. It was not very healthy in those times, to have the president be against you; so, he had to run away to northeastern Mexico, to the state of Tamaulipas. He started a cotton ranch and lived there for a while. Then, when it was safe for him to return to Mexico City, he came back.

LD: Was this before your parents were married?

HG: He left in the 1930s and came back to Mexico City, and then met my mother.

LD: Okay.

HG: He returned to politics, but not at the same level. He then went on to head the *Oficina de Quejas de la Presidencia* Office of Complaints by *campesinos* (peasants) to the Mexican President. Do you want me to spell that?

LD: No, no. Don't worry. As I was saying, Jim Fogerty will send this back to you and you can edit it.

HG: Okay.

What led him to the Senate to begin with was that he was a leader of the *campesino* movement; they were more peasants than farmers. In the United States, farmers are mechanized and they have large tracts of land, but these were really very small subsistence farmers, *campesinos*. Being part of that movement in San Luis Potosí, it led him to occupy a position in the Senate.

When he passed away, he was still head of this Office of Complaints coming from the peasants to the Mexican presidency.

LD: When did he and your mother meet and marry? Was it in Mexico City?

HG: It was in Mexico City, and it was around 1940. I was born in 1943, as I mentioned. Then they were separated in 1945, so I didn't know him very well. I got to know him later when I was in my early twenties. I'd go visit him at this Office of Complaints at the National Palace in Mexico City. Even then, it was not a real intimate relationship. It was kind at arm's length, but fairly convivial. There were no animosities.

He passed away when I was already in the U.S., so it must have been in the 1970s that he passed away. My mother passed away in 1996, some twenty years later.

LD: Are you an only child?

HG: With León, yes, but I had a half brother from a previous relationship that my mother had, and his name was César Zepeda. That was also his father's name. My brother passed away a couple of years ago.

Now I'm the only one in my immediate family, except, of course, for my son, who lives in New Orleans, Louisiana and has two children. One is two years old and the other one is four years old. His name is David Garcia. He's a real estate developer in New Orleans. His wife is Lauren Coleman, and her family has lived in New Orleans for generations. They were living in California, because David had attended UCLA to get an MBA degree. Then when the real estate disaster happened, they moved to New Orleans, shortly before the hurricane [Katrina] hit [August 29, 2005]. They had already purchased a house, which was heavily damaged, but, fortunately, it was not flooded. It was wind

damage, so the insurance covered it. That's where they live. It's very far away, but what are you going to do?

LD: Yes.

Let's go back to Mexico City. Tell me about your childhood there. Tell me what kind of a kid you were. Did you like sports? Did you like school? What was school like? What was Mexico City like at that time?

HG: Mexico City was much nicer then than it is now. The population was far smaller. Today, I believe it's about 25 million in an area about the size of the metropolitan area of the Twin Cities.

LD: Wow.

HG: You can imagine what it is like, because it has about six times as many people as there are now in the Twin Cities. It's a mad house. I don't even like going back there anymore because it's so crowded. The traffic is tremendous. The smog is awful. There is a lot of poverty.

I remember, talking about poverty, that was one of my main concerns when I was growing up. For some reason, I was really bothered by poverty. I was fortunate enough to grow up in an upper middle class family, so I had a lot of advantages that others didn't have. But it really bothered me that people were very poor. I remember hearing stories from my grandmother and others that when I'd be walking around, when I was five or six years old, I'd always ask for coins and give them to the beggars in Mexico City. There were a lot of them, and now there are even more than at the time. This huge gap between the middle class, which is very small—then it was small and now it's smaller in proportion—and the upper class on the one hand and the poor on the other hand was always something that I didn't like. I think it was good that I didn't because it's a terrible flaw in Mexican society, this huge gap.

LD: It is sad.

HG: Yes, between the wealthy or even the middle class and the poor. For the wealthy and the middle class, it's very nice, because they get to use all that labor that's extremely cheap.

LD: Yes.

HG: A friend of mine who works here, and is from Mexico City—he's a lot younger than me; he's probably in his thirties—took his wife to Mexico City. I imagine it's not the first time. They go there regularly. When they came back, he was telling me that he told his wife while they're there, "This is the real first world, not the U.S." What he's referring to is the fact that a wealthy person or even a middle class person in Mexico and

other Latin American countries lives better than most wealthy people in the U.S., because of that huge abundance of labor.

I didn't find it funny. I always found it offensive. For example, today you find that the wealthiest man in the world is a Mexican, Carlos Slim. He's the owner of a Mexican phone company and the *New York Times* and several other companies. In a country that has 40 million very poor people, I think it's offensive.

LD: I want to focus a little bit back on you as a kid, when you were little and academics. Don't get me wrong I want to hear all of your thoughts on these things very much indeed.

HG: [chuckles]

LD: But I just want to get kind of the basics and the structure down.

HG: Sure, sure.

LD: Tell me when did you graduate from high school?

HG: I've got to go back a little before high school.

LD: Okay.

HG: I went to six years of grade school in Mexico, and then to what is called *secundaria* in Mexico, which is middle school here.

LD: Yes.

HG: When I was in eighth grade in Mexico City, I was going to the Colegio Colombia. Then my mother decided to send me to a boarding school in Los Angeles, California. It's customary among families who can afford it to send their children either to the U.S. or to Canada or to Europe. So they sent me to this military school in Los Angeles, which was called Saint Paul's Military Academy. It was a peculiar mixture of military administrators and nuns.

It was a very, very good school. For some reason, my family, which was prone to do things like that, didn't check on the fact that it stopped at ninth grade. So, when I went back for summer holiday, they scrambled to get me into a different school. This friend of my brother's had been sent by his family to Canada, so they sent me off to Canada too. I didn't want to leave. It was very hurtful to me, because I thought they were rejecting me. Nobody really explained to me why I was being sent, you know?

LD: Yes.

HG: I thought they didn't want me around.

So I went to Ottawa, Canada, to Saint Joseph's College. That was run by priests—no military, just priests. By that time, I was getting real rebellious. I was there for a couple of years and I said, "I don't want to be here." So I went back to Mexico City, and I got even more rebellious. I had this period of great rebelliousness. They couldn't figure out what to do with me; they had put me into a school in Mexico City and I wasn't going to class.

At this time, my mother's brother had moved to Los Angeles because he'd married an American. So they sent me off to live with them. I started going to a public high school, Hawthorne High School in Hawthorne, California, which is very close to the airport. It's quite different now. At the time when I got there, Mexicans were a very small minority. I don't recall ever seeing an African American in the school. Now, if you go to that area, Inglewood/Hawthorne, there are a lot of African Americans and Latinos. At the time I went there, I was one of the few. There was a lot of prejudice. That wasn't a real pleasant experience. Plus, you know, I was accustomed to going to these private schools, and then going to a public school and being a minority was not really a good change at the time. [chuckles] But now I think it was a fantastic experience, because it showed me what the other side lives like.

LD: Yes.

HG: I graduated from high school with some hardship because I didn't really pay much attention. I think I was pretty bright, but I didn't dedicate much time to studying. I dedicated more time to partying.

LD: [chuckles]

HG: Then I went to college the first year at El Camino College, which is still there. Actually Hawthorne High School and El Camino College are still there. After the first year, I came back to Mexico. My grades were poor because in college you get less supervision and I had not developed discipline.

LD: Yes.

HG: I simply was not prepared for less supervision, because I was partying all the time. My family got really mad at me, and they said, "You've not going anywhere." I finished at the university ITAM, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, where I studied business administration. I graduated in 1967.

By that time, I was getting more acclimated to living in Mexico, so I worked for a couple of years. I was working for a great company, the Economist Intelligence Unit, which is still around. It's part of the *Economist* magazine's financial group. It's a British firm, but they had this office in Mexico City where they ran all the business in Latin America. I was a consultant with them.

This same thing of disliking poverty really bothered me, seeing the extremes in Mexico. Also, Mexico is a very traditional society, and it was boring to me because I didn't see a lot of new ideas floating around and being exchanged. There were brilliant people like anywhere else, and I was fortunate to be around some of them. My family had very good connections. But there was this rigid way of thinking, as if things could not change. It was very boring to me.

So I decided in 1971 to return to the U.S., to California. I had some cousins living there, the family that I had lived with and some other cousins. I thought - I'm going to go back and I'm going to become a writer. That's what I wanted to be at the time. I didn't really like business. I thought I'll be a writer. I had a gift for writing; I still do. I'm a pretty good writer. I went back and I thought I'm going to get a job that doesn't keep me real busy. So I went to work for a Disneyland Hotel at the front desk.

[laughter]

HG: I started going to college again in the evening to study philosophy, things that would get me thinking again.

LD: For a master's degree?

HG: No, no. I just wanted to be creative. I wasn't interested in degrees.

I worked there for a while, but I got back into the partying scene and I wasn't really doing a lot of writing.

Before I went there, I had met a woman from Minnesota in Mexico City. She was student teaching at an American university in Mexico. It used to be in Mexico City, but now it's in Puebla. She was a student teacher at that school, and she was sent there from Mankato, Minnesota. We dated while she was there. She came back to Minnesota and I went to California, and we corresponded. Then, she went to visit me and I came to visit her in Minnesota. We got married in 1973, and that's how I ended up in Minnesota.

[laughter]

LD: Ahhh, so in 1973, you decided to live here?

HG: Right.

LD: What's her name?

HG: Linda Olund. She is David's mother.

LD: So in 1973, you come to Minnesota. What was your first impression of good old Minnesota?

HG: Cold.

[laughter]

LD: When did you come?

HG: Well, actually we got married in the summer, so I thought it was great.

There was a very peculiar thing that happened to me. It was like I had foreseen being here. Maybe it was that commercial of the Land of Sky Blue Waters that I used to see in California, but I had no inkling that I'd end up here. I have this sixth sense that sometimes tells me when things are going to happen—though not precisely. I'll give you more details about that later. It's a very peculiar thing that I've never known how to manage as fully as I could. It's kind of a gift I was given.

In any case, I came, and since I was married then, I figured well, now I'm going to have to be responsible and get a real job. [laughter] So I went to work for IBM [International Business Machines] in office product sales. They used to have an office on Highway 100 in Golden Valley. I thought, boy, this place is so far. We were living up in Shoreview, and I had to drive to Highway 100 and [Interstate] 394. At the time, I thought that was a huge distance.

LD: [chuckles]

HG: I never really liked business that much, but something always kept pushing me back into business for some reason. Anyhow, I was there for a while - a couple of years.

Then, I went to work for a securities firm [Prudential Bache Securities, Inc.] that I found much more interesting. That's when my son David was born, in 1976. I started promoting this idea of opening up the Mexican market as another instance of that sixth sense. Remember this was in 1976.

It was around 1976 that I started to promote the idea of opening up a relationship with Mexico, which didn't appear to make any sense, because the securities market in Mexico was a tiny little thing, mostly for the very wealthy. It was kind of like a club activity. They used to go in there and have a cognac and a cigar and chat and watch the trades. It was a tiny, tiny little thing, but there were some very wealthy people that my family could give me access to. So I started to propose that, and I was sent to Mexico City. I started talking to people in Mexico City, and some liked it and some didn't. It took a long, long time before the idea finally caught on thanks to my efforts and those of Merrill Lynch and others. Now the Mexican stock market is quite sizable and there's a lot of activity.

I remember right before that, I used to go see the head of Mexican Banking and Securities Commission who later became the Mexican ambassador Gustavo Petricioli to the U.S. and I'd keep telling him, "We need to internationalize the Mexican stock

market.” He’d complain to mutual friends and he’d say, “Boy, you know, Héctor’s coming back again to tell me his same story about internationalizing the Mexican stock market, and I can’t stand listening to him anymore.”

[laughter]

HG: I’m very persistent, so I kept plugging at it, and eventually it did happen. I didn’t actually benefit from it a great deal, except for having a very good paying job and a nice lifestyle of expenses covered and a lot of travel. But it was terrible for my marriage, which ended in a divorce in 1980.

At that time, I was working for Prudential Bache Securities, which is now Prudential Securities. They had created a special position for me as liaison with Mexico, and they had been asking me to move to Mexico because it didn’t make any sense to live in Minnesota, work for New York, and do the work in Mexico City. I was always traveling. They kept saying, “You should go to Mexico.”

After we were divorced I figured, well, I’ll move to Mexico. My son was about four years old at the time, and it was really painful to me, and painful to him. So I tried it for a little over a year. I thought, no, this is not going to work. I’d come and see him every couple of months on my way to New York and back from New York, but it wasn’t frequent enough. So I decided to leave the job. By that time I was kind of fed up, because I didn’t feel that the interest that I had in helping Mexico was shared by some of the people that I worked with. You know, people in business are out to do business. I cared for Mexico because I was a Mexican, but other people didn’t necessarily feel the same way. I was kind of fed up with that.

I came across this great product in Mexico called Theo-Vital, which was a skincare line. A friend of my mother was talking wonders about the product, how great it was for the skin. So I went to visit the company and met the inventor, Theo Camacho, who was a genius. The guy was brilliant and totally self-made. He started being extremely poor and become a millionaire in Mexico. He started being a peasant, moved to Mexico City, and got into representing people in show business and, eventually, he discovered these products which, at the time, were revolutionary. They were water-based, with no creams, and the fantastic thing about them was that they actually, through a chemical process, penetrated the skin to moisturize it; whereas most products at the time were just on the surface. They would make the skin look good because they would reflect light and they felt soft, but it was not really your skin that felt soft. It was the product. I thought Theo Vital was a marvelous product. So I went to meet with him quite a few times and we started an agreement that I would represent his products in the U.S.

So bought a lot of products from him and moved back to Minnesota to be with my son. I rented an apartment close to where my son lived with his mom. By now, his mom was remarried.

Later on, my partner and I decided that we should own a home on Summit Avenue in St. Paul. If you go to Summit Avenue and Hamline Avenue, you still see this huge, very old mansion on the northwest corner. It's actually a duplex, a three-story duplex with a basement. It was built by a very famous architect who had something to do with building the Capitol. I remember because he took some of the marble used in the Capitol and laid it out on the sidewalk.

It was this beautiful mansion on the side of Hamline. I lived on the third floor; those were my living quarters. Then, the second floor had all kinds of bedrooms from my partner and his family when he came to visit. Then, my office was on the main floor. It was really interesting. [chuckles] It was a great adventure, because the product was magnificent.

I remember Minnetonka Labs [Laboratories] - I don't know if you remember that company. They made Soap on a Rope. They were very interested in the formula. There was this company in Switzerland that flew me out there twice to try and buy the formula from us. I thought we were going to do great by ourselves, so I rejected the offer. This was one of the top companies in the world in skincare, I rejected the offer, and then we weren't able to get the company to succeed in the U.S. We finally closed it down after quite a few years of trying. But it was very, very interesting. We had distributors in a lot of states and in Canada. We almost made it globally, but we didn't.

Then I started my consulting company, which was called MEX-US [Global] for Mexico and United States. I did a number of consulting jobs for different companies, and I came up with another one of these really visionary ideas in 1990, I believe. I went to visit the Mexican ambassador to Washington, D.C., that I mentioned earlier when he was the head of the Banking and Securities Commission of Mexico, Gustavo Petricioli. He's the one who said, "I can't stand that Hector's coming back to tell me all about his idea."

LD: [laughter]

HG: I went to see him in Washington with a friend of mine who worked under him. I told him, "We really need to be part of this free trade agreement between Canada and the U.S." I gave him all the reasons why I thought it would help Mexico. I'm sure he had heard about it before, but something in the way I said it inspired him. So he started pulling strings that I couldn't pull, and he became very interested.

Then, I convinced the former dean of the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota - Ed Schuh, G. Edward Schuh - he has now passed away, to do the first tri-national conference on a North American Economic Union. This was in 1991.

LD: Let me just quickly check because I want to get the chronology right. When did you start your consulting business?

HG: It was right around 1990, I believe. I still had the skincare company but it was going downhill, so that's why I started my consulting company.

Then I came up with this great idea, or so I thought at the time—I'm not so keen on it anymore. It was really an innovative idea. The staff at the Humphrey Institute thought that Ed Schuh and I were totally crazy. They said, "There's no way that the U.S. and Canada are going to accept Mexico as a partner. You're wasting your time." Much against their opinions and their lack of interest, we were able to pull it off, and there was a two-day conference at the Humphrey Institute by the name, "A North American Economic Union?"—with a question mark. The Mexican Secretary of Commerce, Serra Puche came, and the Mexican ambassador, and the American ambassador who put together the U.S./Canada free trade agreement. There were some great speakers, about thirty, from the three nations. I was one of them. I remember there was hardly any interest. The first day, there were some business people who attended. But the second day, there were about fifty students in the Cowles Auditorium. I remember the second day was the day that the Mexican secretary of commerce flew in, in his private plane on his way to Washington. My friend, the ambassador, later told me, "Do you know what the secretary of commerce whispered to me when he walked into the auditorium?" I said, "No." I was speaking right when he walked in, and I remember I was upset that the two of them weren't paying attention to what I was saying.

[chuckles]

HG: They were chatting. Anyhow, he said, "The first thing he said to me was, 'What are we doing here?'" [laughter] There was minimal interest. There was no interest.

LD: Well, it's Minnesota, too. It's not a border state or something...

HG: Right. Nobody thought that it would ever happen, so there was no interest.

But, what did happen was that the two of them invited Governor Arne Carlson to go to Mexico. I helped with José Trejo, who used to be the head of this agency: Spanish Speaking Affairs Council. He was the first executive director of what is now CLAC.

LD: That was the Spanish Speaking Affairs Council then.

HG: Right. He and I helped organize the visit to Mexico. The group went to see the Mexican President Carlos Salinas, and also the secretary of commerce and the secretary of agriculture. I think Governor Carlson was kind of surprised, to say the least, because the first meeting we had in Mexico City—I don't think he'd ever been there—was with the secretary of agriculture, a very sophisticated guy who is a multimillionaire and was an educator before he went into politics. He had this huge office, larger than this room. We walked in and he was surrounded by about eight of his people, and the best interpreter I have ever met. I've met a lot of people who translate well. This was the best. She was so precise. She was incredibly professional. He talked in Spanish to us and she translated. When he was done, he invited Governor Carlson to speak. Governor Carlson didn't say very much at that meeting. I don't think he had expected something like that, you know. It's because of this wide chasm between the powerful and rich and the poor. A lot of people in the U.S. think that because a lot of Mexicans are poor that everybody is poor

and that's not true. There are highly educated, very sophisticated, and very rich people, and this was one of them. So it was kind of an unexpected surprise.

Then I proposed something which would have been another great idea, but it never gelled: a think tank within the free trade agreement, which would identify opportunities that would come about because of the agreement and connect them to small entrepreneurs and poor business persons who otherwise would have no way of gaining access to those opportunities. We went to meet people at El Colegio de Mexico, which is one of the best graduate schools in Mexico, and talked about the idea with them.

Later in 1993, when this came to fruition and Congress started to discuss not a North American Economic Union, but a North American Free Trade Agreement, I persuaded corporations in Minnesota with the help of 3 M to create Minnesotans for NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. I was then hired as executive director.

LD: This was 1993.

HG: Yes, it was in 1993, and the agreement was signed and was enacted in January 1994. Unfortunately, it was not what I had expected. I thought this was going to grow the middle class of Mexico, and eventually spread to the rest of Latin America, and the middle classes of Latin America would also grow. Well, as you know, that didn't happen. Some people, mainly the rich and the middle class, got richer and the poor got poorer. Actually, the number of poor almost doubled since then, and many of them are now here as undocumented workers.

I remember at that Humphrey Institute event where I told you there were thirty speakers, after it was over, one of the staff members for Ed Schuh came up to me. She's now a consultant, an African American lady. She walked up to me and she said, "Do you know that you were the only speaker who mentioned people?" Everybody else had talked about product, services, laws, and money. Nobody talked about people.

I think that was the huge flaw in the agreement, because the agreement allowed for the lowering of barriers to capital and trade but not to labor flows. There was no provision for visas for poor workers. As a consequence of that, the Free Trade Agreement has not been well looked upon by a lot of people in Latin America.

You read a lot about the macro economic benefits of NAFTA, which were huge. The trade among the three nations grew tremendously and there were a lot of positive results in terms of exchange of products and services and capital, but people in Latin America started to look at it and to say, "So what happened to the poor?" Now, Hugo Chávez and Castro and others point to that flaw in the agreement. As a consequence of that, what was expected to have spread throughout the whole hemisphere by 2005, as President Clinton expected, did not.

That really bothered me. That was really irritating to me, and I'm sure to many others. It was sort of a repetition of my being bothered by the marginalization of the poor and, to

me, an erroneous business approach. Yes, there were immediate benefits but, in the long term, huge problems would result from it. This thing of not focusing on people creates a lot of problems. I remember that, in about a year, there was an enormous problem with the decline in the Mexican peso's value. I don't know if you want to hear about this, because it's kind of technical.

LD: You could give, maybe, the broad implications.

HG: The financial system across the world was put in danger because Mexico had unilaterally decided to let the peso float. The central bank, Banco de Mexico, had been sustaining it for a long time because a stable peso made it attractive for investors in other countries, not only in the three nations of North America, to invest in Mexico. There was a decision made in Mexico, which was not effectively communicated to those investors, that they were going to let the peso float, and these guys were caught with millions of dollars in Mexico, which had been converted into pesos. All of sudden the peso was drastically devalued. So they were very angry. It's a well known fact that President Clinton had to make a multimillion dollar loan to Mexico, which was since paid. It was a very precarious situation.

In any case, to my mind, that happened largely because not enough was discussed about people, about the difference in cultures, and how Mexican leaders used to make decisions at that time. Mexico was not very democratic, so leaders didn't consult with anyone to make decisions. They just made decisions and told everybody else what to do. They didn't inform people because they weren't accustomed to that kind of a partnership. If people and culture were more taken into account when international deals are put together, things like that wouldn't happen.

LD: This is post NAFTA, 1993, etcetera.

HG: Actually, this happened in 1995, I think. They called it the Tequila Effect.

LD: [chuckles] At the time, we began to see *large* numbers of Latinos moving to Minnesota.

HG: Yes.

LD: First, can you tell me kind of briefly career-wise what you did maybe from that period to today? Then, I kind of want to talk about the growth of the Latino community and your reflections on that.

HG: Okay, sure. What that did to me is that it strengthened in me the desire to do something of a more civic nature rather than a business nature. So I started working for non profits.

For example, there's an international peace organization that used to be called Moral Re-Armament. They're in about seventy-five countries. It was created prior to the Second

World War with the intent that the war not take place. They failed, but after that they were very effective in helping bring Europe back together and in helping create peace in other nations. So I helped them set up a chapter in Mexico.

I also worked with one of the organizations that they had created called the Caux Roundtable. Caux is this tiny place in Switzerland on a mountain overlooking Lake Geneva, a beautiful place. A castle there was donated to the group by the people of Switzerland after the Second World War; that's why this organization is called the Caux Roundtable. It's a group of CEOs from all over the world. It was headed for a time by Win Wallin, the head of Medtronic, who recently passed away. I helped them also set up a chapter in Mexico. Their intent is promoting equitable relations between wealthy and poor nations, ethics in business, and peace. I started doing more of that work. I also remarried in 1998 to Bayana Olchefske, an HR executive at Wells Fargo

LD: Sure.

HG: Then, I was hired as executive director of NCCJ, the National Conference for Community and Justice, which used to be the National Conference of Christians and Jews, which was started in the 1930s in New York to reduce the prejudice towards Jews and Catholics. NCCJ was actually brought to Minneapolis because Minneapolis was considered to be the capital of anti-Semitism at the time.

LD: Yes.

HG: I had been on their board for a long time. They were having some funding difficulties and they hired me as executive director. The name changed to the National Conference for Community and Justice because the communities that it served were no longer only Catholics and Jews. It had expanded to American Indians, and Latinos, and African Americans, and others. That's why the name changed. I still kept my MEX-US Company open. Eventually, NCCJ, which is a national organization, a nonprofit, closed the district office here in the Twin Cities (the district was Minnesota and the Dakotas).

Then I did other work for companies working with Mexico that needed to help Mexican workers learn how to manufacture their products and establish collaborative process. After that, I decided I've got to go back to business, because I'm not making a living. [chuckles] So I went back to work with Wells Fargo Bank. I started locally, first in private client services, and then San Francisco hired me as vice president of International and Domestic Emerging Markets. I was there for about three years. Then I went to work for UBS [originally Union Bank of Switzerland]. I was a broker with them until this disaster of the housing bubble and the derivatives hit the markets.

Fortunately, right around that time, I was offered the job here at CLAC, which gave me an opportunity to work again with the community. Actually, it's a first in two ways. It is the first time I ever worked for the government. I always thought I'll never go into politics, as my father, because I used to get offended easily. So I thought I'll never survive politics.

[laughter]

HG: I had always thought I would never work for the government and here I am. So that was the first time. The other first was that it was the first time I worked exclusively with the Latino community. In all the other things that I did for the community—oh, I forgot to tell you one of them; I'll tell you in a minute—it was with all of the minority communities, with NCCJ, with international firms.

The one that I forgot was that I was publisher of *Colors Magazine*, which was in the early 1990s. I think it was right after I left the position of executive director for Minnesotans for NAFTA.

That brings us up to date.

LD: That brings us up to date then?

HG: Yes.

LD: I really want to talk about your work now. Throughout all those years, I'm sure you were witnessing the tremendous changes that were happening to the Latino community here in Minnesota.

HG: Yes.

LD: Let's talk a little bit about that. You came in 1973, right, to Minnesota?

HG: Yes.

LD: If you look at the community then and you look at the community now.

HG: Yes, it's totally different.

LD: It's completely different. Let's talk about changes from the 1970s up to now. What are some of the changes that you've seen in the Latino community?

HG: I think numbers is a big one. I don't recall what the population was at the time, but it definitely was not in the hundreds of thousands. I remember that there was a Mexican restaurant, Coronado's, in Minneapolis, and there was Boca Chica here in St. Paul, but that was about it.

I was a rarity, you know. It wasn't bad, because the kind of prejudice that I experienced in California when I was at the public school was a much more aggressive one. I think here there was more of a curiosity as to why I filled executive positions and did relatively well. That was not the kind of Latino that they were used to at the time, whereas, now,

it's very common. Now you find Latino executives like yourself and many others in the top corporations. I remember they used to invite me to join all the boards.

[laughter]

LD: Yes.

HG: But it was not open, you know. It was not open like in California. I remember walking down the street and this car full of kids, threw a beer can at me from the car. Good thing, they didn't hit me. Here it wasn't an openly aggressive prejudice.

LD: Yes.

HG: Here I was never confronted aggressively. I did experience being dismissed or not taken seriously. To a degree, that still happens today. I see it in terms of the resolution of disparities. I'm speaking about this personally; I can't say it officially. Personally, my observation is that the disparities will not cease until the majority community starts to see us and other minorities as having wise and valuable contributions to address those same disparities and we focus more on contribution. There's not a sense of partnership in solving the problems.

There's a great deal of generosity and civic interest in this state. It's one of the most generous states in the country, but it's also one of the states that has the worst disparities.

LD: Right, right.

HG: So there's a paradox there, and I think it's because there's not a clear enough communication and respectful enough communication.

LD: It's funny that you say that, because one of the things that this oral history project is really looking to document are the contributions, the things that we could partner on. Let's talk a little bit about that. You're in a unique position to really weigh the impact of the community. Let's talk about that. Let's talk about what have Latinos brought to Minnesota.

HG: I'm sort of an abstract thinker. To me the most valuable thing that we bring is a different perspective on reality. Great as any nation or culture might be, all cultures see very little of the total of reality. So, what different cultures bring to the table is this different perspective. You see that side of reality and I see this other side. If we put them together, we see a larger part of reality and we're better able to manage it. That's the main thing that I think we bring, but that's brought also by other cultures.

Specifically, the Latino culture brings a greater appreciation of family, friendship, and faith. Those, to me, are the three areas of excellence of the Latino culture. As you know, coming from another country in Latin America, our countries did not excel in the area of government and civic endeavors because we were run by elites who exploited the masses.

So people took refuge in family, in friendship, and in their religion. I think those three areas are where we make our biggest contribution and could make a lot bigger contribution if we were allowed to do so.

LD: If we were a more equal partner.

HG: Right.

LD: Let's talk about that. What would you love to see? How do you see the Latino community moving forward in two years, five years, ten years, twenty years? What would you like to see?

HG: Well, I'd like to see more of these projects. For example, you and I worked with TPT [Twin Cities Public Television] and the Minnesota Humanities Center where you identified all of these Latino artists and brought to light all the work that they're doing, their contributions to youth and to the economy of the Twin Cities. And there are the interviews that I later did of Latino executives in the Walker Art Center, and in major international corporations. People are prejudiced largely out of ignorance.

LD: Yes.

HG: All they know about us is what they read every once in a while in the crime section of the paper. It's true that there is crime in our community, mainly because there's this clash of people who grew up in impoverished situations with not a great deal of education, no English, and all of a sudden they're confronted with this modern society where they don't understand anybody well. Some of them are prone to get into trouble, so that appears in the news. But that's not the whole picture.

LD: Yes.

HG: Getting people to see the whole picture, especially through the educators, the schools, which is what the Humanities Center brings to the table. They're involved in education. As you know, they filmed DVDs that will be distributed throughout the state with this Legacy Fund support that we got. That's going to help a lot. The more people get to know us, the more respect there will be. I think one of the big problems is that people make judgments before knowing what others are like.

LD: Yes.

HG: They look at them superficially and they say, "Oh, I saw this guy do this," so therefore everybody is like that, or "I don't like the way this person looks. I don't like the way they talk. I don't like the way they dress," and, all of a sudden, that permeates everything they believe about our whole culture, which is very superficial. So I think we need more depth of perception and understanding.

LD: As we kind of look forward, what do we need to get there? That's kind of a forward vision. What do we need to do as a community to get there?

HG: Unify. [laughter] I think if there's any message at all that I would like to convey to our own community, it is to work as a team. There are brilliant people in our community who've attained levels of distinction in this state, and throughout the country, and in their home countries - a lot of brilliant people in every area of society. Where we're always failing is in team work. We don't work as a team. We get emotional and we get upset over things that are not all that big. Everybody fights. Americans fight. The Jewish people fight. Those are two examples of cultures that, in spite of their differences, manage to work them out and talk about them, and resolve them in a sense, because of democracy, the ability to communicate in spite of differences.

LD: Do you think the fact that we're coming from over twenty different countries, and we're coming from vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds, makes a difference?

HG: Yes.

LD: I've actually heard this a lot from the different people I've interviewed. How do we unify? How do we bridge those socioeconomic barriers or disparities? The fact that I'm Venezuelan and you're Colombian and you're Cuban, how do we bridge those gaps?

HG: Well, I had an opportunity to talk about this Saturday at a forum on education at La Conexion in Minneapolis, the community center. The reason why I brought it up in that context - which was more about how do we get our children to the university - is because I think we need to bring the issue up whenever possible. I think in our culture, we don't like to talk about unpleasant things, because we're so convivial. You know, we like to go out and socialize and laugh a lot. We're great at laughing and enjoying a good time, but when it comes time to say, "I don't agree with you on this," or "I didn't particularly like the way you did this," that's where our culture fails us. We are not used to dealing with those difficult things. I think we need to do it. If we don't do it, all of these growing numbers in our population and all of the distinctions that individuals achieve are not going to be very powerful if we don't work as a team.

Yes, I agree that we all come from different countries, but even in our home countries, that's the same problem.

LD: Yes, that's true. [chuckles]

HG: Our countries are very divided.

LD: Yes.

HG: I'm hoping that it's changing now. It's like what I was saying about Mexico. The gap between the rich and the poor is still enormous.

LD: Yes, it is.

HG: So that's my recommendation: that we make it a point to talk about this problem, even if it's unpleasant, and that we face up to it. I'm one of the many minority members who, when we meet with the majority community, I raise my hand and I say, "Let's talk about the elephant in the room." It's usually about something that they're doing, but we should do the same thing within our own community. Let's talk about the elephant in the room.

LD: Is there anything else that you would like to share?

HG: Yes. One thing, which would take a long, long time, but, I'll just plant the seed. It's a concept that I came up with in the early 1990s called "Cultural Complementarity," which is the paradigm or filter that can allow people to see assets in cultural differences instead of seeing them as an impediment or as an alienating factor. It's this recognition that we see very little of reality, and we could see a lot more if we would only tolerate those difficulties in dealing with people who are different from us. I think that's what makes democracy work. It's the ability to accept people who are different and hear what might seem stupid or might seem crazy, but you talk about it and you work together to produce something better. That "Cultural Complementarity" is something that I've been writing and promoting for years and years. Someday, perhaps, it will take hold.

[chuckles]

LD: We can only hope, right?

Anything else at all?

HG: No.

LD: Oh, wait. One more minute.

HG: Okay.

LD: What are you proud of?

HG: I'm proud of overcoming some of my big shortcomings in having grown up as a spoiled kid.

LD: [chuckles]

HG: I'm proud of having left a comfortable environment to face difficulties in a country that wasn't mine, in a culture that was not mine. I can't claim to have done a perfect job. I'm still in the struggle of trying to learn. I'm proud of my Latino culture and Mexican heritage. I am proud of my son David, his wife Lolly, my wife Bryana and grandchildren Blaise and Carter.

LD: Excellent.

HG: Thanks a lot.

LD: On behalf of the Historical Society and myself, thank you so much for sharing your story.

HG: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Lideres Latinos Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society