

**Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin**  
**Narrator**

**Lorena Duarte**  
**Interviewer**

**July 26, 2010**

**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin - **RH**  
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

**LD:** Today is Monday, July 26, 2010, and I'm Lorena Duarte. I'm going to be doing an interview with Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin. We are at—remind me of the name . . .

**RH:** Main Street Project in South Minneapolis.

**LD:** Reginaldo, first, I just want to say thank you so much. I know you're very busy. This is really wonderful that you've agreed to give your oral history to the Minnesota Historical Society. First, could you give us your name and spell it?

**RH:** Sure. Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin.

**LD:** Excellent. What's your date of birth?

**RH:** I was born April 28, 1967.

**LD:** Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born and the community there?

**RH:** I was born in a little village called Puente de Plátanos. That's on the banks of a small river called Plátanos, in the municipality of Sanarate, in the province of Guastatoya about fifty six kilometers east of Guatemala City in Guatemala, towards the border with Honduras. That is part of the region that we call *Oriente*, in Guatemala.

**LD:** Tell me about your family. What are your parents' names and your siblings?

**RH:** My father's name is Magdaleno Marroquin and my mother's Bernarda Salvatierra. I'm one of thirteen children, nine of us males and four females. I'm in the middle, number seven. [Chuckles] We moved to the northern rainforest of Guatemala when I was about three and a half or four years old from that original village in Sanarate. It is in the Northern rainforest where I lived till I was about seventeen.

**LD:** What was the name of that village?

**RH:** Our new village's name is Ixobel.

**LD:** How do you spell that?

**RH:** I-x-o-b-e-l. It is in the municipality of Poptún and that's P-o-p-t-ú-n. This is within the larger province of Petén, spelled P-e-t-é-n. Guatemala has twenty-two provinces. Petén is the largest with almost one third of the country and it is a rainforest ecosystem.

**LD:** You lived there from when you were about three and half till you were seventeen. Tell me what that was like. Tell me about your family, and about the community there.

**RH:** It was a very traditional, rural, farming, *campesino* community. The defined area where we lived had around two thousand people back when I was a kid and this was during the middle of the civil war. By the time I turned fifteen or so, the war was at its worst and defined most of what we could and couldn't do. Also, Poptún was home to the largest military base in the country and also where the elite forces were trained. So we were sort of a magnet for a lot of military activity, and, of course, rebel activity and all of that. Our region was really hard hit.

We farmed and survived within that context. To farm we would (walk) to our farms outside of the villages, for us it was just about an hour walk from where we lived to where we farmed. We stayed there (at the farm) frequently for full weeks during school breaks. During school days, we would go in the afternoons after school which were located in the main town. Those routines very much defined every day's life, which was always a struggle as there was never enough of anything, especially food, which was our primary concern. Whatever we did was for the purpose of producing food. Cash, itself, wasn't really that important to us in the context of our priorities and what we did every day although it had a critical role to play it was still limited. We produced cash by marketing some of our produce from the farm. By produce I mean products in general which included well over thirty-five different things from avocados to sugar cane to pineapples to some wild large edible fruits that we harvested from the forest and that were very marketable. We also had roots like yuca (manihot) and yams. Fruits like oranges, tangerines, bananas—six or seven different kinds of bananas—and on and on. Living with all of that and growing in a diverse ecology is a permanent source of knowledge and lifetime experiences.

My childhood has become a definer of what I do today. My work here in Minnesota is based on some of those lessons and learned values, ethics, and hard work, but also a solid awareness of what really matters in life and what doesn't.

**LD:** Yes. You say it was a traditional village. Were there any other languages other than Spanish spoken there?

**RH:** We had what we call Maya; although there is no single recognized Maya language. All of them are Mayan.

**LD:** Sure.

**RH:** We have just about one per province. Also, another Mayan language called Q'eqchi' was also spoke in our area.

**LD:** Is that [spelled] K-e-c-h-i-?

**RH:** No. Q'eqchi is different from K'iche'. Q'eqchi starts with a Q. K'iche' starts with a K. The K pretty much defines it.

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

**RH:** No. We used to communicate with many kids that spoke Mayan and other indigenous languages we spoke only Spanish. We're really more from that background, although my dad has an indigenous heritage he comes from a very different population altogether. It's called Aji. A-j-i. This was a very small enclave of natives in a remote region of Baja Verapaz. Which is another province, located southwest from where we were living at that point. Then the rest of the family, it's very European, not totally white, but, light skin, light color eyes and that sort of mix which separated us from the native population like it or not. The older kids and my cousins especially were more exposed and they spoke Quechi very well. Although the interactions with indigenous families was ingrained in our family culture, in my case, it was a while before I noticed that the indigenous kids Spoke other languages than Spanish as they had learned Spanish already as the population grew.

**LD:** Tell me about your schooling up until you were seventeen.

**RH:** We went to elementary school in the village's public school. The school itself was very militarized, but the education was all right, I guess. In general, we learned to write and read and do basic math, just the regular elementary school stuff. I skipped a year helping my dad on the farm after sixth grade, then I attended the middle school in town, in Poptún for two years. A permanent memory I have of those years was the lack of access to books. I always liked to read, and I remember reading any book over and over until I would find another one. There was this book that feels like I read it fifty times, *TwentyThousand Leagues under the Sea* with Captain Nemo.

**LD:** Oh, yes, yes. Jules Verne.

**RH:** Jules Verne. There was an American family that used to live close to us. The same people don't live there now, but the resort that they used to run is still there. They had some books, and that was one of them. It was big enough and it took long enough for me to read through it to get excited about reading it again and again.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**RH:** So that was about it.

**LD:** Tell me what happened when you were seventeen.

**RH:** Since very early on in my life, I liked farming. I really loved it, farming systems and all that. I really learned a lot from my dad from working on the farm but that wasn't enough. Not that it diminishes the qualities of his teachings, but He's illiterate and with that came many limitations. What I learned from him was the process of inquisitiveness and curiosity, which is the critical components of true learning skills and this is why he knows so much besides having a great memory. There is stuff I learned from Him that I'm still trying to figure out after having studied a lot of stuff myself. I frequently find myself going back and to ask him about stuff, I know that even back then he knew a lot more about things that really matter than most Ph.D.s I've met in my studies of agriculture systems. We understood a lot of important things, but not from the scientific standpoint, and I always wanted an explanation which my Dad could not provide. For example there's this fungi that attacks avocado trees. So I would ask what is a fungi? How does it work? Where does it come from? How does it reproduce? What would fight it? What would eat it? I knew I could find answers and since we never used chemicals, we lost crops that could be saved with a little more knowledge of the natural ecology we were surrounded by. This is what I wanted to study and this is what I pursued from that point on.

**LD:** You mean pesticides?

**RH:** Right, we didn't like using anything on the farm that would kill indiscriminately, whether it would kill plants or animals, whether it's a fungicide that will kill fungi or a pesticide that will kill pests or a herbicide that will kill plants and so on and so forth. We just didn't like that. We watched certain plants become very resistant to diseases and thrive and become better on their own. We saw what was happening to those, and then we'd reproduce whatever worked. All of that was really my interest and I knew there was more knowledge outside of our confinements.

In this process of inquiring I learned about a national school of agriculture. There were two schools in Central America—back then— one of them was close to Guatemala city. I learned that those who graduated from agriculture were sought after, they were considered knowledgeable and respected, I liked the idea of going there, but even going outside of our village was difficult given the conditions we lived under. When I finished eighth grade, my sister had married an agronomist who had graduated from the same agriculture school I am talking about, he would come to visit us on the farm. I would ask him all those questions and I was just fascinated. So that's how I learned more about what it would take to make it to the school. One day I said to Him, "I want to go to that school." He was like, "No . . . you won't make it. Well, yes, you can, but it's really hard." "What do you mean?" "Well, you have to test out. You can't just go there. You would need a full scholarship and all that." So, from my condition, I thought that it was good that there were scholarships, what he had politely said was "this is not a school for ignorant campesinos from illiterate parents". But he was trying to marry my sister so he

had to be nice and was willing to at least help answer questions and eventually helped me study for the admission test and he meant it when he said it was hard it took me two years studying, to just pass the admissions test.

**LD:** Wow.

**RH:** When I finished eighth grade, I moved to Totonicapán up in the highlands where my sister and my brother-in-law now lived. He and three other agronomists coached me for a full year on what to study.

**LD:** Wow.

**RH:** I studied everything from physics to doing math in your head, because they wouldn't allow calculators in tests, and they would give you this complicated . . . math problems. It took me two years because I failed the first test; I didn't make it. So I studied for another year. Then on the second try, I was perfectly qualified, and I got in. There were well over two thousand of us who applied from all over the country. There were one hundred fifty scholarships.

**LD:** Wow.

**RH:** About fifty of them were already handed out to the rich kids. So it was really only about a hundred who could test for and that was that.

I got into the school in 1985, and graduated in 1987. But it was worth three years of high school, plus two of college. I mean, this was a *very* intense all boys boarding school. Most of the professors were from the University of San Carlos, they would transfer back and forth and loaded us with stuff that I don't even know how I curve absorb. We managed a *very* large farm as part of the schooling. In the mornings, we'd get up at five and start work at six fifteen and work till eleven a.m. Then come back to the dorms, shower quick, go for lunch, start classes at one o'clock, finish at five, quick dinner at six. At seven p.m. meet a mentor to study if needed and study until ten p.m., supervised, *every* day. There were no breaks or few of them, short or no vacations, except for Saturdays and Sundays. At Christmas, we had one week and then back into it again. [Chuckles] It was fun *that* is the sort of thing I wanted, so for me it was a breeze from the effort and commitment part although not in the learning area. In that aspect it was really hard as I was starting with very little exposure to a lot of the stuff. On top of that I had had nutritional deficiencies that got on the way.

The school's social worker noticed this, as she would sometimes find me studying with flashlights or other sources of light that did not glow too much (it was mandatory to turn the lights off at ten). Sometimes I would go to other places where supervisors would not look and keep studying because I couldn't keep up with just the regular time. I was surprised that instead of punishing me the supervisors told the social worker that I wasn't really doing anything wrong if I needed that much study, they appreciated my effort and starting to look for help, somehow, they knew the food wasn't good enough. The social

worker found me a scholarship on top of the main scholarship, so I would get a little bit of cash and I could buy vitamin supplements and things like that. [Chuckles] It was very interesting. We had a standing joke about memorizing stuff “take note or take sukrol” a vitamin supplement that was supposed to be good for short term memory improvements. Too much of the learning was memorization, especially the language part, Latin names for example, we were tested on over 3,000 of them for everything from lettuce to the over 1,000 species of trees in the rainforest.

**LD:** Oh, because your nutritional deficiency was keeping you from your ability to study?

**RH:** Well, yes, I was always very tired and very hungry I’d never get enough food. I guess the problem was also from before I got to school. In the school, every kid had a *lot* of other stuff. I mean, they would bring foods from home, their parents were visiting and bringing them extra support, I had nobody, my first visit was on the last year, by older brother came through and stopped in the town next to us and I asked permission to leave campus so I could see him, my Dad never saw the school, he came to the graduation which was at the national theater in the city, not that he did not want to, just the reality of living in poverty, all of these followed me everything with the baggage and the deficiencies, mostly the nutrition. The food in the school also wasn’t the best, so you really didn’t get everything you needed compared with the physical and mental demands. Most kids had other resources to supplement their diet, a handful of other students and myself, we didn’t have *anything* I was there on my own, two sets of clothes that fit the uniform code and that was it, for three years. The social worker’s help was great, absolutely. I graduated top of the class, and was singled out from a larger group and hired by a company before graduation.

**LD:** I just want to go back really quick. The city that you moved to with your sister and your brother-in-law, what was the name of that?

**RH:** It’s called Tonicapán.

**LD:** And the name of the school, again?

**RH:** It is called ENCA - Escuela Nacional Central de Agricultura. You can actually find it online now. It’s the Central National Agriculture School.

**LD:** Okay. You graduated in 1987. What did you do then?

**RH:** I actually went to work for a chemical company, a German company that was based in Guatemala City. I lasted about a whole month.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**RH:** It’s just not in my blood. I couldn’t do that. I intellectually understood what they were doing, and I, fundamentally, out of principle, couldn’t do to other farms what we wouldn’t do to our own farm.

I just had this fundamental principle, a core value that food needs to be produced without chemicals and that there is plenty of science and knowledge to do it otherwise, that is why I wanted to go to school, not to become some big companies peddler. Besides, I had a brother who had already been intoxicated from using chemicals and now I had a better understanding of what a say “active ingredient” was and it wasn’t pretty. We tried chemicals once on our farm, and used the experienced as a very important lesson. My dad used that experience to show us why we didn’t do that. What he said was, “If this stuff can kill in such a violent way . . .” On our land, there had never been applied any of this stuff. So we took a very potent herbicide and spread it in an area. It just killed everything. The stuff that was really hard for us to kill with machetes and mechanical means, it just completely obliterated it. My dad’s conclusion was that “If this stuff can kill in such a violent way... nothing that will do that could ever be good for you”. So he said, “No. We’ll labor. It will be a more honorable way to live.” That stuck with me. So when I got out of school, I had a little bit of newly acquired knowledge in science, but that didn’t change where I had come from.

So I lasted about a month, then I went and volunteered at a program called Faith and Hope. It’s an international catholic program and in Guatemala, it runs a middle school and high school in the Oriente, the eastern part of the country. I went there and volunteered for a year with a small stipend. Then I went back to the highlands and volunteered for a year at an orphanage helping kids learn agriculture, food production for their own homes and all that. [Chuckles] I guess the education, in that case, didn’t do for me what everybody else was pursuing, you know, get a high paying job, drive an expensive car, buy stuff. I had never needed stuff and what I needed, I could pursue with a modest income that would not turn my education against my own upbringing.

**LD:** Yes.

**RH:** We had this opportunity to create a robust career in the agriculture industry, because we were trained to do that. I went on to the south coast, later, with my brother, and we oversaw the deployment of a large farm. We were trained to do all of those things and more. It just didn’t fit. So that’s what I did; I went back and forth, but I kept the farming system development as my goal. That’s really where I wanted to be. Growing things is important, but it’s only important if it meets a larger purpose. That larger purpose is what always kept drawing me, so I was always drawing pictures of the whole country, what it would look like if we did things different or what if people created natural dams and used them to irrigate hills that were unproductive, all kind of things like that. It was about systems, not really about the specifics of farmers.

**LD:** So you volunteered for a year in Oriente and you volunteered for another year in the highlands. After that, what . . .?

**RH:** This Italian priest, a Catholic priest, thought I was material for the university. [Chuckles] He found me a one-year scholarship, and I went to the University of San

Carlos. During the weekends, holidays and breaks I would volunteer at the same orphanage.

At the orphanage, I met who is now my wife, who also volunteering there. Then I moved to a bigger part of Chimaltenango where this orphanage was based—the Chimaltenango province capital. There I was hired by an organizations working with villagers to export goods and cottage-made industry sort of products. I was *really* attracted to that. In my family, we are all good marketers, and I understood the economics of rural communities better than I knew. So I was hired to manage a marketing program for this organization. That pulled me out of all the other informal stuff and sort of settled me in a better paying job that I liked with time to go to the university. In 1990 I went to the university and worked, and in 1991 I worked fully for the organization. That was really rewarding. We created the second largest exporter of non-traditional products of the country. We worked with well over forty-two communities. There were about thirty five hundred producers all over. We became a well known, national institution.

**LD:** What was the name of it?

**RH:** Aj Quen.

**LD:** Okay.

**RH:** That is Cakchiquel. It's a different language. It translates as "weaving together."

**LD:** Ah.

**RH:** So we did a lot of weaving products. We always brought agriculture into the picture, because once I was there, I started coordinating with honey and coffee producers, and we created what we called the ENLACE Guatemala, which became like the national confederation of organizations of that kind. I was the president for a short period of time before I came to Minneapolis in 1992.

**LD:** Ah! Okay. I was just about to get to that. 1992 is when you came to Minnesota?

**RH:** Yes. I came to Minneapolis straight out of Aj Quen. But I had come to the U.S. a couple of times in 1991, for conferences.

**LD:** Okay.

**RH:** I had come to visit my then girlfriend's (Amy) parents in Iowa, and we visited organizations both there and Minneapolis, so I had started a little network here. In 1992, Amy came up to Minnesota to try and enroll in a program at the University of Minnesota. She came in January, in May she was accepted in the program. So I ended my involvement with Aj quen, July 31 was my last day, and on August 2, I arrived in Minneapolis.

**LD:** Tell me, what were your first memories of coming to Minneapolis or Minnesota?

**RH:** Oh, boy. Well, first of all, it was rainy. The *smells* were so different. We lived in a little space on Thirty-Fifth Street down in South Minneapolis. I think the smells, the characteristics of the smells all over, were the most powerful thing. Even now, when the fall starts to get rainy and a little bit cold, I just have these flashbacks to being in that situation. Now probably the reason I had more awareness of that is, one, it's my operating guide. We developed a *very* keen sense of smell for a lot of things in the forest.

I couldn't drive, of course, because I didn't have a driver's license. Even though within a week I was able to get a driver's license—I had some days to drive with my Guatemala driver's license—I really couldn't get in the car, because I didn't know a *thing* about getting on the road and so on. So I biked *all* over the place, to the University, and frequently it would be raining. So the other memory was just getting chilled to the bone in eighty-degree weather in Minneapolis. I couldn't handle it because it was *way* too cold. [Laughter]

**LD:** I can imagine. I have my own memories, because I'm from El Salvador, and that's even hotter. Tell me your wife's name.

**RH:** Amy,

**LD:** So she was at a program at the University. What did you start out doing here? When you came, did you go to school, did you start working, volunteer?

**RH:** I actually volunteered all over the place, especially at North Country Co-op, which is defunct now. North Country Co-op was the first place I volunteered. I also volunteered at Saint Martin's Table on Riverside Avenue because we knew some of those folks already. It was really easy at this Resource Center of the Americas, and right away. I started doing *very* superficial, *very* unprofessional workshops there on Guatemala. My English was absolutely zero.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**RH:** I mean, not absolutely zero, but it was so close to it that it was really hard to communicate. But it still was really fun doing that. I didn't have a work permit for a little bit. By the time I got a work permit, I had been here for about a month. Those were my first jobs, really, and they were volunteering.

What I did was, immediately after I arrived, I started a small business called Guatemala En Vivo. I did that so I could market a lot of products from the same people I used to work with. I actually lived—survived, better said—for about a year and a half or two marketing products from the villages that I used to work with. It also kept me going back and forth. You see, honestly, I was about to last no more than two months here. That's when I hit bottom. I started looking for jobs as soon as I got my work permit. But what jobs? You don't speak English. I was coming from a *very* prominent position in the

country in Guatemala. We were given multiple visas, you know, to come to the U.S. anytime we wanted. We were appreciated *there*. But here was *nothing*, absolutely nothing. It took about two months, and then it really hit me. I didn't really want to stay.

I calculated how many words I was learning every day of English, and the speed at which I was going. I had already started taking English lessons at the U of M. I actually enrolled at the U of M and started going to school almost right away. I calculated that if I needed to learn about three thousand words to fluently perform any of the things I already knew how to do in this country, it would take me about five years at the speed I was learning. So about two months later I think my analysis was that it wasn't working. I had books and books of words that I learned every day so that I could keep repeating them and improve my English. About two months later, I came to the mathematical conclusion that this was not going to work. [Laughter]

**LD:** Wow.

**RH:** So . . . it was like, all right, I have to turn around. Now, Amy didn't want to. I mean, she couldn't. We had agreed to stay at least fifteen months. I had made a promise that I will stick to it for the whole fifteen months and, after that, we'll make a decision. I was sort of forcing her to make the decision two months into it. So I said, "All right. I will stay. I will figure it out. We'll get through this."

Just about then, I got a job at Seward Montessori School in Minneapolis as a T.A. [teaching assistant]. That was a bit better. I was asked to help this kid with Down's Syndrome. I always loved kids, so that was a cake walk for me, just going in there learning to like this kid and helping him out with his own language. That's what gave me the clue that it was possible to actually get to a *much* faster way of learning English. As I taught him phonics, words and all of that, I learned them myself. So the teacher would teach me how to pronounce and then I'd teach the kid. She was very good . . . Teresa. I can't forget her, because, oh, she was so patient with me. I understand now why she was so patient. *Nobody* wanted to do that job. It included changing the diaper of the kid and doing all of those things. He was already like seven or eight years old, but he had Down's Syndrome. But, heck, isn't that what we're supposed to do? Take care of the vulnerable? That was my philosophy, so I was fine with it, but nobody wanted to do that. Nobody ever lasted more than a couple of weeks. I was the only one who was happy doing it. [Laughter]

For me, it was like, wow! This is really great. What I heard about was the dishwashing scenario, you know, that that is about the only job you can get as an immigrant. Well, heck, I had an actual professional job. I was reading books about it. I was learning about it. I was learning the language. I had to learn it to teach this kid. I was learning basic math and English, and then I learned that if you actually study math, you can actually learn a language much faster.

**LD:** Really?

**RH:** Yes. Here's the key. The hump is learning to think and dream in a new language. You don't learn to think in a new language by repeating stuff and memorizing words. You learn by starting to *think* in the other language and math is really a way to think. So if you try to get immersed in mathematical calculations and mathematical analysis, you *have* to think in the other language.

**LD:** Ah.

**RH:** There is no choice. That really was the hump. Six months later, I was starting to really climb up the ladder and feel more confident, and that whole feeling of sinking started to go away and things looked brighter. From then on, it was a lot of hard work, but it wasn't hopeless anymore.

**LD:** Right. How long were you at the Montessori school?

**RH:** For one school season. So it must have been from like November, December—yes, it was somewhere in there, because I know it was cold already and I was walking to the school—until June 11 or so when the school year ended. That was that. I didn't really go back.

**LD:** By this time you had also started the business Guatemala En Vivo?

**RH:** Yes, and made all kinds of connections. It took me probably six months to know every organization in the Twin Cities. I had met Mark Ritchie, whom you've heard of. Mark was running the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy [IATP] out of the University Technology Center. The ITT is in the building next door. I was already starting to communicate in English and doing presentations here and there. Someone else had invited me to do a presentation in Saint Paul to the Environmental Quality Board, it used to be called. Niel Ritchie was part of that board, and that's Mark's brother. Now, Niel heard that presentation. I gave him a little pamphlet that I had put together.  
[Chuckles]

So he took it back to Karen Lehman at ITT. Karen and Dale [Wiehoff?] and Mark Ritchie and Neil Ritchie and other folks like that were running that institution, a think tank, as they call it. They sort of got the word back to Karen Lehman, who speaks fluent Spanish, and worked with farmers in Mexico. She called me up and said, "If you'd be willing to take a stipend, we could make you a corner so you could help me with the U.S. Farm Bill." That was the 1995 Farm Bill. I said, "I have *no* idea what that is, but it sounds good."

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**RH:** The Farm Bill, I didn't know there was such a thing, such a *massive* piece of infrastructure of our agriculture system. Anyway, I went in. I helped her just pretty much bring farmers out and show them their hotels and just assist her. That was about as good as it was ever going to be. I got a little corner desk, a computer and a phone line.

Right after that, I went back to Mark Ritchie once the Farm Bill thing was done - not even done, but with enough coordination there and Karen was going to write it. I didn't really fit in that position, but I liked it. So I was looking for something else. Mark said, "Well, what is it that you want to do?" I said, "Listen, I'm primarily a business person. I have a background in agriculture. Not in policy, but in the actual *business* of agriculture. You guys have trade and policy. I would like to do the trade side of the institution." "How do you do that?" "Well, first of all, I think we should create the fair trade program. Because, when it comes down to it, fair prices and fair treatment of farmers is really the ultimate policy." So it was like, "Okay, let's do that." So I started the Fair Trade Program. We went on to pretty much spearhead the creation of the National Fair Trade Federation, and then, later on, started to trade with farmers in Mexico and other places. As a result of that, we incorporated the Transfair labeling system from Germany, brought it to the U.S. and started up a national movement. By the time we did that, we were already in the 2105 building, next door here.

**LD:** Yes.

**RH:** Once we finished that second stage, and once we had a national structure to support fair trade, then I started the Peace Coffee Company. That went through like that. It took about four years, very intense, very good. That pretty much got me to where I needed . . . I didn't expect to be an executive of a large institution like I was in Guatemala, but we had a really large institution out there. [Chuckles] I don't think I will ever be interested in doing something of that size in this country. You can do a *lot* more with a *lot* less in this country than down there, you know. That was pretty much it. At that point, I felt like I could do anything.

Peace Coffee, though, I knew I had a limit. I knew what I wanted. I knew we needed the institution. I knew because there was not any other around here. I knew we had to have a support infrastructure in place. Peace Coffee by itself was nothing. It would never have taken off. So we needed support from a lot of people and from some sort of star who could give us a competitive edge. We were able to get Rigoberta Menchu Tum, the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize [laureate] to partner with us to launch the product. Also, we had the Free Trade Federation and the Transfair labeling already taking off. That was really what was important in the context of launching a small business. Fair trade businesses themselves didn't have that sort of support and infrastructure before. Now, it's mainstream. It's all over the country.

**LD:** Yes.

**RH:** But we started pretty much around those developments. It was a large group of us, but we were the ones who were able to push it, the ones who stepped forward in terms of the organizational infrastructure. I understood what it took to be a small business, and I understood what it meant to have support infrastructure systems in place for trading and all that, for certification, for assurance, for independent party monitoring. All of those

things were key to key to the success of anything like Peace Coffee. Peace Coffee wouldn't exist without that, you know.

**LD:** In those four years, approximately four years, that you were setting up this national network and Peace Coffee, what were some of the challenges that you faced and what were some of the lessons that you learned?

**RH:** Well, a lot of the challenges were fundamentally based on the fact that I really didn't know how to do this stuff. I knew what it looked like when it was done, but I didn't know how to get there. The people who knew how to get there weren't really interested in teaching *me* how to get there.

They wanted to do it themselves. You can understand why. So the challenge was always staying, being able to stay the course, being able to stay there, because I was really not competent at running this system to get us where I wanted. It was clear that everybody understood and I cleared up a lot of people's minds, a lot of minds, in terms of where we need to be to be successful, the big picture stuff. I was able to break it down into components and the process to get there, but how do you write a proposal? I have *no* idea. How do you write a business plan? We wrote business plans. There were teams of us. We didn't respond to somebody else who was going to make sure your business plan was good, you know. If it was good to us, it was plenty. But those business plans didn't look at all like the business plans that were required around here to go and make a presentation. I was really not a good public speaker. I liked it. I was not intimidated by it, but I couldn't articulate myself. So all of those things were the biggest challenges.

Now, you asked a second part of that question. What was it?

**LD:** What were some of the things that you learned?

**RH:** Oh, what I learned, also, was that for all you are working with people of goodwill and all that, you've still got to protect your back, which was *very* disappointing.

**LD:** Yes.

**RH:** I grew up in a culture where we didn't have to protect our backs. We *knew* who the enemy was. We didn't have to protect our backs, because someone else had it, and it was our friends. And you trusted your friends. You knew nobody was going to stab you from the back. They will protect your back and you will protect theirs. That was my feeling when I first got introduced and learned about this whole national system, just to learn that it wasn't the case, that these individuals who were so immersed in the fair trade and stuff would actually turn around and stab you. Learning that was probably the *most* important lesson, and the most disappointing part of being involved in a movement that felt revolutionary and that I connected to because I came from that background. I thought the terms and the principles and the ethics and the trust level and all that was the same. These were people who were trying to support the revolutionary movement in Central America. So I thought they understood how we operated. That realization, learning that, was

probably the worst. We don't value a lot of the stuff that people fight for around here. I didn't grow up in that environment. If you can help someone, you *help* them to be successful. I'm not saying that everybody was like that. But learning who is and who isn't is a challenge. I didn't think I had to.

And so, to me, the corporations, the people exploiting, the people trying to push NAFTA, shove it down the Mexicans so that they could scrub every farmer down there . . . the people doing those things, those were the enemy in context of creating a movement, *not* the fellow who was trying to organize another Fair Trade company, for example, or another non-profit. You're like, wow! Okay. So it isn't as rosy as you think. Now, once you learn that though, then you create a new cluster and a new layer of working relationships that are real, but you've got to learn that first.

**LD:** Yes.

**RH:** Then you can *really* make change, and then you stick to those folks until you retire with those folks. That's how I ended up where I am now.

**LD:** Which is? [Chuckles]

**RH:** It's a long time between the Peace Coffee and now.

**LD:** Tell me, are you still involved with Peace Coffee?

**RH:** Not really. I have never really become that involved with any of the companies that I start. Peace Coffee, though, I did manage it for quite a while. I can't remember if it was a full two, three years, or something like that. I've never done that with any other company I started. But I did manage it for a while, and then hired Scott Patterson, who ran it for a while. Then, of course, Lee Wallace, who runs it now, was hired by the board after Scott left. We established an infrastructure so that IATP would always have control over that process. That's why we created the company called Headwaters International, so that it was a sole subsidiary of IATP. So the control will always be with a group of people who did not earn dividends from personal gain. They have no personal gain from the company itself, but could benefit *tremendously* by having a trade arm of the institution that concentrates on policy and, consequently, a real exposure to how policy impacts people and how policy can be created differently to what we get now written up on desks. People have no clue how things really work in the real world. So that sort of situation continues to be very valuable, and in that context I could continue to be connected to the movement, but not to the company itself or the other companies that I have started.

**LD:** What were some of the other companies that you started?

**RH:** I didn't start a lot of them directly, but I was part of the teams that started them. I never really did anything similar to Peace Coffee until now, after Peace Coffee. I was at the Hiawatha Sustainable Woods Co-op, for example, and the Headwaters Forestry

Cooperative up in Long Prairie. I worked with the Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association out of Hancock, by Stevens Point, Wisconsin, and the Sustainable Woods Co-op down in Spring Green, Wisconsin. I also worked with six communities in northern Guatemala starting forestry cooperatives there, and then helped a lot of folks who were buying from these companies to reorganize their marketing plan and that sort of thing and providing some business support.

**LD:** You said that, for example, Peace Coffee is always under the . . . I want to say direction, but you used an acronym [IATP].

**RH:** The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, IATP.

**LD:** Okay. So from that point until now, what have you been doing? [Chuckles]

**RH:** I always want to be a farmer. That's really my larger dream.

It's just that I would always get distracted by these other things. You can't be a farmer in a vacuum, just like you couldn't be a Fair Trade company in a vacuum. There has to be a support system, an infrastructure, and so on and so forth.

After all that, I moved to Belle Plaine to partner up with a couple there who owned a sixty-seven acre farm, because I wanted to be a farmer. That didn't go anywhere because, again, there was no support infrastructure. There were no farming systems. There were ideas out there, *tons* of them. I researched over two hundred fifty farms looking at what people were doing, but they were all ideas and projects that did not add up to a system, and I needed a system. That's what I started doing when I got out of school in Guatemala. So I thought, darn! Even if I get busy being a farmer, I'll be a *very* busy farmer going nowhere.

I'd be growing a lot of things for what purpose, you know. To sell them? To sell them for what purpose? So that other people can have them? So that other people can have them for what purpose? Once you go up to higher purposes, it didn't seem to add up to a circle that I could feel comfortable being part of. Getting busy wasn't really my priority.

**LD:** Right.

**RH:** But accomplishing something bigger was why I wanted to get busy. After a year there, I went back to Guatemala. Actually, we went back to Guatemala first, in 1999, lived there for a year, built a forestry company with my brother, built an office complex and all that. I came back in 2001, moved to the farm, tried to disconnect from everything else that I had done. [Chuckles] I didn't last a year, had issues with neighbors and stuff, and then moved to Northfield in 2006, in October. That's when I thought, okay, I've got to go back to systems development. And this time, I'll do it where I feel called to do this, and that was for people living in poverty in southern Minnesota.

If you target that population, your priority is going to be naturally driven by Hispanics, because we make the bulk of the poverty sector. So I went back to the drawing table from October 2006 to February 2007. I worked on designing a process, a strategy, for getting Hispanics, Latinos, into the agricultural sector for the purpose of walking them out of poverty and to have a long term permanent impact in the food and agriculture system in this country. That's the origin of the Rural Enterprise Center.

In February of 2007, Niel Ritchie here at Main Street Project accepted the Rural Enterprise Center as one of the programs for Main Street Project. One of the reasons I didn't create a non-profit—I was approached by *many* Latino leaders, Latinas, who wanted me to just start up a non-profit—is I said, “If we start up a non-profit, one, we'll isolate ourselves and it will strategically put us at a disadvantage. And we will also end up managing organizations instead of doing the real thing.”

**LD:** Right.

**RH:** So I said, “No. If there's a larger organization, with people we trust, individuals who won't just turn their backs on us, if we have that, that's what I want to do.” Niel was there and his team, and he brought his organization. He invested a lot of resources in getting this idea. He understood the idea. He knows we'll get it done or quit. Either we're successful or we shut down. But we don't putz around with this thing. So he knew that, and that was enough for him to say, “Okay, let's see if we can find some money.” He found some money, and we got going, and here we are, what, three years later now.

**LD:** Before we get into the work that you do now, I think it's important to talk about the impact that the political and economic turmoil in Guatemala may or may not—you tell me—have had on you, your outlook, and perhaps what you experienced as a child. I'm just curious about your growing up during a time of civil war, if that impacted you and, if so, how.

**RH:** You can't escape that if you live in the middle of the war.

**LD:** Yes.

**RH:** And, second, if you've got the largest military base in the country within about half an hour walk from your place, you are woken up. We would wake up at four a.m. to gunfire *every* single day. It was training gunfire, of course.

When we were somewhere else in another village or another place, were sleeping somewhere or if we were out in the forest, and we heard gunfire, you know, we had this numbing feeling about a lot of it. It was a permanent state of fear. The thing that we dreaded the most was being caught in the middle of a checkpoint. With young people and young boys, recruitment was forceful. The military would pick you up with your work clothes coming from the farm and put you in the back of a truck and break you down that day and put you in the military. If you were lucky, you made it through for a while.

Otherwise, like most of my friends from school, you came back in a body bag in a couple months. That was it.

I mean, if you live in the middle of that, you learn a lot of things. You observe a lot of things. A lot of kids that, for whatever reason, got into a situation with the military, were just shot in the back, you know, while running away. Others were just killed.

I remember, as a very little kid, a table and this image. There was a neighbor, Alphonso . . . The tables were about as high as this, about thirty-two inches high, I would say. I had to climb up and grab the box to be able to see him. So I wasn't really that tall yet when I have the first memories of what that was all about. He had been shot about four times from the back with an M-16 and blown apart. This was a very poor family, so he was still in the clothes that he was shot in. There was no morgue or anything. He was already smelling, had been washed up a little bit. But it was still Alphonso there. Then [unclear—sounds like Cayetano] just down the road, was picked up by the military. I went to his funeral when he came back about two months later in a body bag. It was sealed. You couldn't see it because, obviously, he was blown apart. And so on.

As a kid, you don't exactly make a lot of sense out of it, but believe me, I've got those memories. They will never go away. I know that. Then you start growing up and you start investigating and learning. And very quickly you take sides. You pretty much decide and start to believe the things that make sense to you. Some people call it radicalized and to some others, like us, it's just what makes sense to you. If other things could be made to make sense to a lot of those kids in those situations, I am *sure* kids would pick different paths.

In my case, I couldn't for my life be in the military. I couldn't for whatever reason. People thought it was all right to just go and *spray* people with bullets in a village, and for whatever justification there was for that, that was not correct. That was not right. That was not who we were. So my only choice was to either be a civilian or be on the other side. If you're a civilian, you get nailed from both sides. If you can't be in the military, you've got to be on the other side. It's just not about you necessarily making a choice; that's about the only choice you were given to begin with. I mean, I obviously wasn't violent. I didn't like that. I didn't like the idea of shooting anything. We shot animals and we had a whole ceremony for doing that. We never did it for the sportsmanship and so on.

So I had to find my way. I figured it out - thinking was what I did best. So I got into that through thinking through systems—you know, support systems—medicines, food, all kind of things. Helping the people who were left behind, like sometimes just picking up body parts with my older brother to put them in a . . . He used to distribute Pepsi Cola for that region, so sometimes we'd unload the whole semi and load it with body parts from the soldiers and all of that. Anyway . . . Now, this is not light talk.

**LD:** No, no. I think that it's very important, and it clearly left a deep mark in you as far as social justice. That's really why I wanted to talk with you about it. Those things are

ingrained in you and it's obvious to me that you have a very strong passion for social justice.

**RH:** Well, yes. If you've got a brain, if you've got ways to figure things out, and you've got skills and knowledge, all of those things, and you understand how our world is organized . . . I don't feel like capitalism left us much of a choice either. About the only thing that we can honestly say that we will do and can do in our lives in order to live an honorable life worth living and worth dying, and feeling like you didn't waste much, is to try to undo this *massive* destruction machinery and large scale deterioration of the quality of humanity that we have created. That's about the only way I can see living a life. I *can't* be a *capitalist*, I mean, in the context of the greedy capitalist. It just doesn't fit, just like shooting people all over the village didn't fit for us. It's not in our principles. So, you see, it is very similar. It's just that a lot of folks don't understand it.

**LD:** Yes.

**RH:** A lot of folks don't understand that putting a system in place that displaces three, four, five, six, seven *million* people, farmers, across Latin America – who then try to make their way up north to come to the U.S. because they see an opportunity . . . they don't see that as equivalent to just *shooting* all of those people. *I do*. Some of us do see that, you see?

**LD:** Yes, exactly.

**RH:** That's why it is, to me, not a matter of choosing. Well, I could choose different strategies, different ways of doing what I do, but what I do is what I will do. There is no option in that area. Whichever area I work with, whether it's forestry, whether it's food systems, whether it's farming systems, whether it's growing garlic, whatever it is, it does have that larger purpose in it. Everything we do is organized with that larger purpose, which is to undo, to the extent that we can, the large-scale damaging infrastructure that has been created.

**LD:** I want to talk about the work that you're doing now, because it ties back into what we're talking about. Tell me some of the projects that you're working on. Obviously, the overall goal is to help Latinos . . . well, help people in poverty in southern Minnesota, many of whom are Latinos. Tell me about the projects.

**RH:** Let's start with the system, though.

**LD:** Yes, yes, that's fine.

**RH:** When I created the Rural Enterprise Center, I came back to Niel. One thing I said was, "Listen, we're going to approach food and agriculture from a systems perspective, and then we'll populate whatever system we come up with, with projects that we'll deliver step-by-step on the larger scale system. We'll do so with a purpose: organize and strategize, so that the purpose of the projects themselves is to extract people from poverty

conditions and launch them as the new population of a sustainable, ecologically based, economically viable farming system and infrastructure.”

That means we had to create a mission for the program aside from the mission of the institution. In this case, Main Street Project has a mission. The program itself, the Rural Enterprise Center, had to have a mission to deliver exactly on that. So our mission became to strengthen communities, because that’s important in the context of Hispanics in rural communities. You can’t deviate from that, and that talks directly to the mission of Main Street Project. To strengthen communities by doing what? By organizing the support infrastructure, which is critical to every farmer. That’s why I couldn’t make it back in 2001 as a farmer, because there was no support infrastructure. The systems, as in farm systems management, as in distribution systems, as in marketing systems, as in food and agriculture systems, respond to that support infrastructure and vice versa. Then the programs—in this case, training and all kinds of other program-added aspects – are ensuring that at the end of that project, a family walking out of poverty has all that is needed, or at least all that can be put in front of them, to maximize their success potential. So our mission is to build the system, the support infrastructure, and the programs needed to maximize the success potential of rural families living in poverty.

Now, if you look at southern Minnesota - where our center of operations is - in terms of geographical target, and then within the north half of southeast Minnesota’s fifteen or so counties and compare it to the country, it looks very similar. Food and agriculture employ most of our population: Hispanics, Latinos. Most of the people working in fields and factories related to food and agriculture live in poverty. If you’re going to target poverty through food and agriculture, you have to create a new food and agriculture system that doesn’t do that. Believe me, the government won’t do it. It’s not their job either to create social relationships or fair trade and all that. They can get out of the way in some cases and help in other cases, but it won’t cause the permanent changes and large-scale systems change. We have to do it, us citizens. The second part is that corporations won’t do it either. It is an oxymoron.

**LD:** Yes.

**RH:** Corporations will not create a social justice infrastructure. It’s just not ingrained in the principles for why they exist. So it’s just naïve to believe that it will happen. Now, some executives may change their minds and start new companies that *are* socially and economically and trade responsible, that will do those things the way they should be done. Some of them may be able to change their companies. But the current standard corporation won’t be the one who does it.

So within that context, we have created a path that allows us to zero in to get assets of the families living in those conditions. Then understanding those assets - culture, tradition and all that - gives us the elements to create a strategy to walk them step-by-step through a process in which they’re able to launch themselves as new farmers. Now, that process takes a long time. Whatever doesn’t take long enough won’t be sustainable at the end of

the day because it won't be based in commitment from individuals and also *thorough* retraining and reengagement of resources.

That process starts with community organizing where we reach out to people and work with leaders and all that—leaders as in the family leader, as in the block leader and so on and so forth—and then bringing people out from those conditions to experience growing food, eating healthy,. We bring them to community gardens and small-scale livestock production, where people can just experience it and not necessarily feel like they have to commit to it the next ten years, or invest or anything of that just to experience it. We created that support infrastructure to provide that resource. Then from there we move through a process of identifying opportunities in the market place that can generate the conditions for them to feel like they can move to another stage of this process. They can explore the opportunities and become engaged in food and agriculture, not as workers or laborers, but as people who own and control what they do. Whatever it is, however small it is, it is theirs. That's fundamental. That's the social aspect.

On the other side, we have a business process that accompanies this social process. Now, in this social context, we are pursuing many objectives. One of them is full integration of local resources, local institutions, economic development, city councils, township councils, all of those resources that are now part of the existing infrastructure, into this social interaction and social mobilization, so to speak. On the other side is the business aspect that starts with the same outreach. But as we do outreach and build associations, we are also trying to identify those individuals who must be close to the community gardens and the small poultry, those who have the most potential. And then we can isolate them for a second step, which allows us to zero in to some training aspects of a new system that we have created for producing sustainable, ecologically-based, symbiotically related enterprises. So we have a set of fourteen different already identified enterprises that we engage people in. We're not asking people, "What business do you want to get into?"

**LD:** Right.

**RH:** That's not the business we're in. We're in this business of food and agriculture and then changing the system and restructuring it. Because of that, we've already picked the enterprises we will engage in, because they are *critical* to the overall changing of the system.

The second big stage, after people are identified and discovered, so to speak, is to train them in one of those. Now, they can pick which one of those they want to be part of, but they are all designed for maximum ecological returns and for maximum economic returns in terms of the symbiotic economic relationship that allows one company to trade with the other and with the other internally until maximum value added is achieved on the farm systems. And then, as they go through the training, they become connected to a lot of farmers who work with this system, and then they are ready to be launched, which is the third stage.

Once they are launched, then the support infrastructure is very different than when they got started and discovered, so to speak. That process now is being populated by projects that are put into poultry, garlic, or black beans. We have folks put it into tomatoes and other kinds of vegetables for the local markets. We have folks going through lots of different things, like pig production protocols that we are developing with some forest land that we have access to, and turkey production and free range systems for poultry. We have new building projects, new designs that we incorporated to produce poultry year round and still have a space for roaming, creating spring-like conditions inside buildings during the winter. All of that is part of the project. There's probably around thirty-five or so projects that are now populating this system that we are developing. That is, again, parallel between the social and the enterprise development aspect of this whole new system.

**LD:** Where does your funding come from?

**RH:** Actually, that's a question better directed to Niel, but we have private foundations that are supporting us: the Northwest Area Foundation, the local foundations like the United Way, like the Northfield Area Foundation. The Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation has been a strong supporter from the beginning. We think of them as partners, really, because they are in and out with us all the time—not necessarily evaluating us, but just seeing if we can work on other things with them and so on.

**LD:** So it's a mix of . . . ?

**RH:** It's a *very* large mix. We get a *lot* of support from landowners who donate resources to us. Like land for the training program, for example, was donated by a local investor in Northfield. We have an eighty acre farm at our disposal right now in Cannon Falls that is part of our cooperation with a local farmer. We've got community gardens in Northfield and Dodge Center and Red Wing. All of this is contributed land from the community and so on.

**LD:** The end products, where do they end up?

**RH:** Well, the poultry ends up in a diversity of places. Mostly we distribute to some restaurants. Right now, we still have a problem with production of poultry because there is no processing. So we are working on the processing aspect of things right now, but we are still producing some poultry. Most of it is sold directly from the farms, and a lot of it distributed to restaurants. We also have drop sites where people can pick their own poultry. Last year, we grew about twelve thousand chickens. This year, we'll grow less because we need to figure out the processing. Once we figure out the processing, we'll go up to seventy-five thousand birds in production, I think, next year. It looks very doable for next year now.

The vegetables . . . actually, all of the vegetables from the community gardens get consumed by the families themselves. Then, from the market gardeners that we are launching, those products go to a lot of individuals. Like the black beans, they are

distributed locally through the same outlets that we use and also through the food cooperatives and shipped directly to individuals and churches and places like that.

**LD:** Like CSA [Community Supported Agriculture]?

**RH:** Well, we send to CSA's too. We have a partnership with the Minnesota Food Association. Their CSA distributes our poultry and will distribute our beans and other products that we may have. So it's really a very diverse marketing infrastructure, but it can move lots of products.

**LD:** This started about three years ago. What has the growth been like? How many folks, maybe, did you start off with and how many folks do you have now?

**RH:** It depends on which stage you're looking at. But if you look at the overall community engagement, we had a goal of engaging fifteen or so families, and then we don't want to grow anymore. Because, you see, to us, launching fifteen families and achieving, say, six or seven million dollars worth of gross income for those fifteen families is more important than serving forty-five families and achieving ten thousand dollars per family.

**LD:** Right.

**RH:** You see, we want to launch these folks. We don't want to just tease them around with ideas, because then we become another non-profit. That's not what we want to be. We want to be a program focused on development. And development means you don't leave people halfway through, but put them all the way through to the end and beyond, so that they can become the pioneers of whatever it is that your new system looks like. We are now in the pioneering aspect of this and we have about fifteen families. Those are the folks that we are actually working with on the launch aspect of this, the training and launch. Some people thought they were ready. They weren't; they went back to training again. There is no end to it. It's not like you graduate from this.

You become successful. That's really your graduation point, and not even then, because you have to keep going to keep up with things. This is not a training program that you start and finish.

**LD:** Right.

**RH:** This is an ongoing thing with an end purpose of successfully launching farmers. Now there are about fifteen families all together at different stages of that process. At the entry level of discovering all that, that's almost as big as half of our communities in some cases that have been coming to meetings or going out and setting up a plot at the community gardens. In Northfield alone, we have over forty families that are growing food and bringing other people with them. We calculate that for every family that takes a plot, two other families come out. That's what happened last year. But we never know

who those are. I know who they are in terms of looking at them, but I don't know their names or anything. It doesn't matter to us, you know. But we know for every registered name, there's at least two more. That's a fact.

**LD:** Let me step back just a little bit. Obviously, you're looking at it from a larger scale, etcetera. You came to Minnesota right when the numbers really started to grow. Talk to me a little bit about the growth of those communities, as you've seen them, and some of the issues that you're trying to address, some of the issues that they're facing.

**RH:** Well, primarily, people come here poor.

**LD:** They come here poor.

**RH:** Yes. I would say very close to one hundred percent of all the growth is made up by families who came in very difficult economic conditions. Very few of us probably came with a university degree or even a high school degree or any of that. So the challenges then become discovering what is their purpose for coming? Understanding that, but not just asking them, "Why did you come?" To go to work and earn money, right? For what? To send it back to Mexico or Guatemala, or whatever? That's not what I mean by understanding why they are here, but rather, going deeper than that. Now the challenge for us is to understand that and to actually create a real picture of that family so that we can engage them. The challenge of the families coming up is that they *never* thought of things that way.

They never made a specific plan. They don't even have a *plan* in ninety-nine percent of the cases. They don't really know how to get around here. If they're undocumented, they can't get around. You start going down that path and you'll find about ten or fifteen very specific difficulties that you have to get over in terms of engaging families. And for them to engage, they have to get over the same exact issues.

The idea that you can do something is one of the first ones we've got to get over. So bringing people out of their homes to a community garden is a *huge* step in showing them that they don't *have* to just be cooped up, that other people actually want to talk to you. That the folks who look white and different from you and don't speak your language and all that doesn't mean that they don't interact. They actually can do that. So integration goes a long way when you can get people out of their homes in the first place—and food is a natural, worldwide attractor.

**LD:** Yes.

**RH:** So growing it is a natural heritage that we have. We started connecting those things, and that's how we started dealing with those barriers that people encounter. One is because of their intellectual poverty, which is actually more damaging than their actual economic poverty. Economic poverty . . . well, you can deal with that through very different ways, but with intellectual poverty, you have to start *wanting* to learn. If you are in that situation, and nobody around you understands that really that's the part that is

keeping you from achieving other things in your life, then you never cross that line. Most institutions dealing with economic poverty want to create cash flow, while the *real* economic poverty is dealt with *through* the intellectual poverty solution. It doesn't have to be a university sort of training, formal and all that, but it has to be dealt with, because that's when you generate the energy, the ways of looking at things, the understanding, the clarity of thought, the clarity of purpose, the processes that need to be followed, the rules, the regulations. *All* of those things come from that knowledge. That's what I call the real poverty issue. Once you start dealing with some of those things, then other things look possible on the material aspect, like the cash flow, for instance. But if you start the other way, you just spin for a very long time.

**LD:** Tell me, what do you think that beyond the economics . . . because that's obvious, right? What are the contributions that Latinos bring to Minnesota?

**RH:** Well, there are many. In our case, I'll just talk about what we do and where we pursue contributions. Other folks have many others, and I'll let them speak to that.

In the food and agricultural sector, this country is in trouble. It's one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of biological diversity, *genetic* diversity, access to genetic research that is really sustainable. Meaning that if a corporation that controls seed, for example, disappears and goes belly up, or if a large-scale issue associated with that crop, for example, comes upon this country, what is the solution to that? That question right now has no answer because, scientifically, we are well behind nature. Nature has better ways to fight back than we have to control what it does. So, from ecological catastrophes to failures in the system and so on and so forth, we have created an opening for them. We designed a conventional system that is *very* vulnerable despite how big it looks, as *massive* as it is, as much destruction as it causes. Because of that, specifically, it's very vulnerable. Most farmers don't really know how to farm anymore. They know how to grow corn and soybeans, but farming? No more.

Now, we Hispanics don't have to follow in that track. We can be the ones, together with other new immigrants, that haven't fallen into that trap, the ones who could create a resilient, diverse, ecologically-based, more intense, more productive, more efficient, system that is more aligned with our human values and—with the interest of consumers for healthy foods—products that will make us less sick. We'll have less pollutants. We'll protect the soils and the water. We are strategically positioned in this nation, because we have the culture, the knowledge, the skills, the traditions, and the ability to actually do it at a large scale. Not to say that others can't. But at the scale that is needed to reverse the *massive* destruction of our food production ecology in this country, we are probably the ones that have the answer. If you have time to sit with us and go through how we actually do this in the step-by-step process that we are following, we actually can change the country. In my opinion, we can make that contribution if we decide to do so and if we are supported in doing so. We can't do it, just us Latinos. Just because we have all those things doesn't mean we can use them.

**LD:** What's needed?

**RH:** What's needed is a new approach, a new strategy in the development of policy and the orientation of the *investment* in this country, specifically starting with the Farm Bill. Where does that money go? It's a *very* important question that needs to be answered, because right now, it doesn't go into any of what we're talking about—or at least nothing that you can weigh. There is some, but it's just tokens, not real. It's not going to change the way we are moving investment into more sustainable systems. That's one major piece.

The other *huge* piece that needs to change, together with the Farm Bill, is that we need to create a culture that rewards good agriculture. So we need to take the *agri* and then remove the business from in front of it and put culture in front of it, so that we again can have a culture in front of *agri*, because we lost the culture of it. We've replaced it with business. We created a *massive* agri-business infrastructure, but we lost the culture in the process. So a lot of people are disconnected from their food because of that. That culture is what connects us. We can bring that back. That culture aspect, we can bring it back in a *very* large scale. We are, actually, I think in the food and agricultural sector in this whole country, better positioned there to have a large-scale impact and make a contribution for *many* generations to come in that sector than we are in any other sector that I can imagine.

We won't have the next rocket ship going to Mars. We won't have the next mathematician community. We are not doing well in science. We are not doing well in almost any other sector, because in all of those sectors we are not engaging what we have the most of and where our biggest assets are, and that's our culture, our traditions, our food, especially, and our ability to actually do those things that other people have forgotten. The tradition here and the culture of food production systems in this country were systematically removed from the farmers' fields and their minds. We, luckily, never went to that level of devastation in our intellectual wealth, so we're still wealthy in that area while this country is very poor in that area.

**LD:** Wow. [Sighs] You have your work cut out for you. [Laughter] I just want to finish up with going back to you, personally.

**RH:** Okay.

**LD:** What do you see as satisfaction and what drives you as you hope to do all of that work ahead?

**RH:** When I met my wife, Amy, I showed her a drawing that I had put together about the second year of ag school in 1986. I drew the perfect farm. Then I connected that to the cities and how it would feed the cities. That farm, obviously, had a hill. That's Guatemala, so that's ingrained in us. It had slopes and it had this bottom part with a little valley and all that. So I had put windmills on the top. I don't know where the heck that came from, because I wasn't even that aware of windmill generation, but I understood them from the stories from *Don Quixote*. So I knew you could grind and draw water like

the Dutch did and so on and so forth. So those were on top of the hill. Then around it, all the way down, were contour lines where there were perennial cropping systems, all the way down to the bottom. Then next to it were small villages that will feed from this farm, and then the next, and then the next, and then the next. Concentrated clusters so that you could maximize the use of water and cleaning and sewage and all kinds of other things. Then all of the byproducts from living went back into the farming system, from manure to the toilet that you flush going back into the farming system, which is *perfectly* healthy, doable, manageable, and it doesn't have to be wasted. Not at all. It was never meant to be.

So anyway, I had this picture that I had drawn and I showed it to her. We were trying to figure out whether we should marry or not. I said, "Now, this is my vision for what I want to live for. I want to do it not only myself but work to influence others to do the same thing." Because I know I couldn't do it by myself in the middle of a desert, for example – a desert in terms of ideas, you know. If I can use my training to do that, that's what I want to do for environmentalism. I don't think of environmentalism as being a vegetarian or as being a fruitarian or any of those things. I understand environmentalism as being part of a fully deployed life cycle that includes everything. So from a principle standpoint, we sort of had to align because otherwise life gets too hard, if your own principles are not aligned with your partner's.

So today, when you look at all of this, you can see people who've been victims of either violence— bullets directly like in Guatemala, that's pretty much all of our stories here— or violence because of trade policies like in Mexico, which translates directly into violence, with people being kicked and pushed by the armies out of their fields, foreclosed on, all of that is direct violence. Even though we start with a policy, a document, and so on, we can take all of that and create something new. This picture of a fully ecologically integrated farm does fit a path, for those folks who have a vocation in that area, out of their situation and, consequently, creates opportunities for correcting some of the large-scale destruction that we have created. And we have implemented infrastructure for it and also created an opportunity to create a new system. So it corrects but also creates some permanent solutions. That's what makes it all worth it.

Yesterday, for example—I do this almost every weekend. My wife came to church in Minneapolis because she had to pick up our son, and my brother and I went to the farm in Cannon Falls, which has about forty acres of forest. We had a lunch at a tree stand. We took about a two-hour walk in the woods looking for all kinds of things, tracks and things. We chain sawed half of a fallen oak. We put it in the truck. We went back at about six-thirty or seven to the farm, milked the goat, put some corn on its hayrack, checked the feed for the chickens, went back to check the garden and sat down and had a good cup of tea at the end of the day. That's real life. We know that if you have a chance to do that once . . . But that might not be your vocation. It is mine, so I'd enjoy that twenty-four hours a day. In fact, if that was the case and if I didn't have to sleep, then I would live like that every day.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**RH:** Now, I can still do that. Many people don't have that vocation. But *everyone* can appreciate some of those experiences. And so if we can produce everybody's food, and those folks can come and be part of that experience, and we can do it on a county-wide scale, believe me, I could live the next five lifetimes and not get tired of doing that. So from getting up to work every day and being happy about what you did, all of these things . . . Why in the world would I ever have a doubt or bit of energy less than what I need? This is what gives your life energy, passion, and all that. It's clear. There is no fuzziness in this picture.

So there is no putzing around. We either are successful or we shut down and go back to our little farm. That's the way we see it. Now, it's sort of a common language in our team. But yes, we'll go at this seriously. So that commitment feeds all of this, and the energy flows up the team. And there is also the different material results that we have been achieving, and the fact that *so* many people get excited about this. Last year, I did fifty-two presentations. I reached over thirty-five hundred people. We've had over six hundred fifty visitors at our little small-scale demonstration site. *That* is all the energy I need to keep going on this, you know. It's really fun.

**LD:** Wow. How many kids do you have?

**RH:** Three. They are William, Ana, and Lars.

**LD:** Do they go out there and farm with you?

**RH:** The little one does. My daughter likes to milk and feed the goat. The older one, he likes theater and biking.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**RH:** He feeds the chickens and picks the eggs, washes them and puts them in the little containers and puts them in the frig, *and* he tends the shop, but because he gets paid.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**RH:** Everybody's got a little bit, but some of them don't have it in their blood. It's not their vocation. That's all good. But the little one, oh! Oh, he's a farmer right from the start. Yes, he does almost everything out there. He's going to be seven years old now, and he's already got his own garden. He had to have his own garden and all that. He milks the goat already and feeds it.

**LD:** That's your future.

**RH:** Well, it's theirs, anyway.

**LD:** Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about, about the work, looking ahead into the future?

**RH:** Yes. We are on a path here that is not really well traveled, but it's *well* talked about. You can find a lot of papers about what I did, but very few places where actually a system has been assembled. You'll find a lot of projects that were inspired by all the papers and all the talk about this, but we don't have a system yet. Sometimes it feels overwhelming. People out there who support us, they are the ones who really make it possible for us to keep moving on this. Sometimes just because they said something positive, they published something positive, they wrote an article, or they invited us to come and speak or got legitimately interested and placed a link to our website, for example. Things like that, the fact that we can test and scope out a larger interest in what we do is really what keeps us moving along, and is also the reason that we still make sense out of this. Otherwise, it does feel backwards sometimes.

We know fundamentally that sustainable systems *have* to be the future. It doesn't matter what direction we go, we can't continue the way we're going, period. Right now, the food and agricultural sector spends in excess of sometimes thirty-six times more energy than it produces. So it would be like if you had to pay thirty-six dollars to earn one dollar. Would you do that? Well, no! No one would do it. Why? Because it isn't worth it. But that's what we do in the food and agricultural sector. Now we have to change that, because with that level of deficit, you really don't go very far. The only reason we are going very far is that, for example, if you were to pay thirty-six dollars to go earn one, but your grandpa came back every year and gave you those thirty-five that you lost and fifty more, and then you keep going. You'd grab those fifty and you'd lose them again, and you'd grab them and lose them, and grab them and lose them. Think of your grandfather as the bountifulness of creation.

**LD:** Yes.

**RH:** That's why the food and agriculture system keeps going . . . because we have such a bountiful grandfather. But he's not going to be there forever. Eventually, you will drain your grandfather or he'll die or something. In our case, we're killing the system that produces our food and our livelihoods. That, I think, in a nutshell, defines why we do what we do. But it is also because there is poverty and desperation as a result of this *massive* dislocation of resources, and the destruction of those resources, and the accumulation of those resources in a few hands. So the consequences of that are dire.

As we go forward, we are finding that lots more people are understanding it. We don't expect anyone to be here as a Republican or Independent or Democrat, not from that standpoint, not because it becomes part of their agenda. I don't care if it's a Republican or a Democrat or an Independent or some non-political person, but if we understand the fundamental critical position we are in, in the history of our humanity, and can turn that into specific actions like some people have done, that, I believe, is the only thing that I can add that is worth talking about in the larger context of this. I mean, the rest of it, we can do. We've got a system that we can deploy, large scale, *if* there is that understanding.

Something that needs to happen is for the larger public to understand, the larger-scale society to understand that they are also in the same boat. Right now, they are helping carve the hole in the bottom of the hull.

**LD:** Very wise words. [Pauses] Well, thank you.

**RH:** Yes.

**LD:** This has been an incredible interview and an incredible document for the Historical Society to have. Once again, with my thanks and the thanks of the Minnesota Historical Society.

**RH:** Thank you.

Lideres Latinos Oral History Project  
Minnesota Historical Society