

Ramón León
Narrator

Lorena Duarte
Interviewer

August 23, 2010
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Ramón León - **RL**
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

LD: First of all, thank you very much Ramón.

My name is Lorena Duarte. I will be doing the interview today. I'm here with Ramón León at the Latino Economic Development Center on Lake Street in Minneapolis. Today is Monday, August 23, 2010.

Again, I want to thank you, Ramón, for having me here and for agreeing to participate in this project. First of all, could I get your name and how to spell it, please?"

RL: Ramón León.

LD: Wonderful. What is your date of birth, please?

RL: August 30, 1963.

LD: Good.

First of all, can you tell me a little about where you were born and a little bit about your family, how many siblings you have?

RL: I was born in Mexico City. I am the second of eight siblings. I only lived for four years in Mexico City before moving to the State of Mexico, which is adjacent to Mexico City. It became, actually, the metropolitan area of Mexico City.

LD: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents, their names, and maybe what their professions were?

RL: Yes. My mother's name is Carmen Valadez, and my father's name is Arnulfo León. They were, also, immigrants to Mexico City. They were from rural Mexico. They were originally from the State of Guanajuato and the State of Jalisco. There are three states, Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Michoacán that form like a triangle. They moved to Mexico

City. My father used to be a sales person for a food manufacturing company, which imported foods from Spain. My mother was a homemaker.

I grew up learning the trade as an upholsterer, being trained as an upholsterer, because my dad used to make wooden frames to be upholstered and sell them in furniture stores. So I became an upholsterer at a very early age. All of my brothers became upholsterers, too, by trade. Always, when I grew up, I was supposed to be in charge of the upholstery business. We made new furniture, but we also did a lot of reupholstery work.

I went to school in the State of Mexico at a place called Ecatepec de Morelos. That is the municipality which is in the county. The name of the *colonia*, or name of where I lived, is Jardin del Tepeyac or Gardens of Tepeyac.

I went to what we know as primary school for the first six years of school, then at secondary school for the second three years. It was in Azcapotzalco Mexico, which was almost two hours of public transportation away.

LD: This would be your high school?

RL: Yes. I don't think there is an equivalent. It is what we use. You fulfill twelve years of education, when you finish, we call it, *Preparatorio School*, or we call it *bachillerato*. After that, I went to the School of Escuela Nacional De Estudios Profesionales two years from the National Autonomous University of Mexico to study economy, economics. But I didn't finish my studies. I wasn't studying because I was supposed to be in charge of the family business.

I worked additionally as a journalist. I also worked at a local company that helped local businesses to fulfill their legal requirements such as paying taxes and keeping the licenses up dated. The work that I do right now, it is very similar to what I did when I was in Mexico.

It was in 1986 when I was invited by one of my relatives to start the first furniture manufacturing company in the city of León in the central part of Mexico. After one year of being there, I decided to relocate and move to California, where most of my relatives from my mother's side lived. It was 1987 when I moved to California.

When I arrived in California, I started working at different jobs, but I mostly was dedicated to upholstery. Eventually, I started my own furniture manufacturing activities making new furniture, the wood base, to be sold at local swap meets during the weekends. I would do that in partnership with an older friend that I met in California.

During 1989, I realized that there was a lot of competition, and I decided to explore opening my own furniture manufacturing company by myself and in a different place other than California. I made arrangement with some relatives that lived in Chicago, and I was going to move to Chicago in January 1991. But it was in December 1990 when I received a call from one of my nephews who lived in Saint Paul. It was the custom

amongst us to call during those particular months to wish “Merry Christmas.” I told him that I was going to move to Chicago. He invited me to come to Minnesota instead. When he asked me about the reasons why I wanted to go to Chicago, and I explained that I wanted to open my company there, he said, “You will have a better opportunity here in Minnesota.”

LD: Why is that?

RL: He felt it was unexplored by Latinos, and a lot of needs of the Latinos were not met yet.

I had bought my ticket to go to Chicago already, and he suggested that I should change it and come here for at least a week. He mentioned that if after staying here for a week or two I didn’t like it, he could drive me down to Chicago. I accepted, and I arrived here to Minnesota on January 7, 1991.

LD: Wow. In January. [laughter]

RL: Yes, from California, from Los Angeles, California. It was a big change.

LD: Sure.

RL: But I liked it.

LD: Tell me what were your first impressions of Minnesota?

RL: Well, the geographic and climatic change was obvious, but that didn’t deter me from my intention, which was for economic reasons. But what caught my attention was the fact that I felt a different attitude from people.

First of all, people used to stop me on the street and greet me and ask me where I came from. They would try to say a word in Spanish. Back then, there were not a lot of Hispanics living in this state. I felt like they wanted to learn from me, who I was and why I was here, which is not the same sensation that I felt when I was living in California.

LD: Sure.

RL: Why? Probably because California has a large number of Hispanics living there, mostly Mexicans. Ultimately, they weren’t interested in learning who I was. But here in the State of Minnesota, they were interested in learning who I was and why I was here, and they welcomed me. I felt welcomed. Later, everything changed. Probably because larger numbers of people started coming into the state. Every single community gets concerned when a large number of people who are not similar to them comes.

LD: Sure.

RL: It takes some time before, you know, the trust is able to be established through communication.

Once I started driving around and everything, I learned there was not a big Latino community, but it was a good-sized Latino community and there were opportunities that my nephew mentioned. But I have to mention that my business activities were not necessarily aimed towards fulfilling the needs of the Latino community, but probably the larger community. Everyone buys furniture, not only Latinos. First of all, because of economic reasons, if I was going to give my efforts to reupholstery, it would make more sense to do it with the larger community rather than the Latino community. Why? Because it is not a majority, first of all, and, secondly, because immigrants when they first come to the United States, they don't spend a lot of money on such things.

LD: Sure.

RL: Upholstery was somehow a luxury that not many people can afford. When I was exploring competition, I saw that there were not enough companies offering services similar to the ones that I was trying to offer. So I decided to stay and give it a try.

I also have to mention that very soon after I arrived, I was offered a job. When I went with my nephew to the restaurant where he worked as a cook, I was offered a job, and I took it. I only worked there for probably like four to six weeks.

I started exploring deeper the opportunities that I was pursuing, which was starting my own business. When I started meeting people who made furniture and upholstery businesses, I found my niche, and I had a little work. I very soon moved to Minneapolis because when I came, I came to live at my nephew's house.

LD: In Saint Paul?

RL: In Saint Paul. Then, very soon, it led to, why don't I move to Minneapolis?

LD: Why?

RL: Because the relationships that I had established for my business purposes were here in Minneapolis.

LD: Okay.

RL: It made sense. I moved to the Uptown area, where I found a lot of people that were open-minded. They were willing to at least listen to me. So I became very busy doing upholstery work and reupholstery and new furniture. That was the beginning.

LD: That was in 1991, correct?

RL: Yes.

LD: How long did you stay in the upholstery and furniture making business?

RL: I started my own activities in 1993. First of all, I went back to California in 1992 for a visit.

I was single by then, but my wife [Oliva León] came with me and we got married in 1993 here in Minnesota. It was not a very conventional wedding, I guess, because we were the only ones that were here from our families. From my own family, I only have two nephews, and she didn't have anyone. We got married at the Hennepin County court. We couldn't find a Hispanic judge or a judge that spoke Spanish. After work I went to pick up my wife at my apartment. We went to the court and we got married there with no other big event, only just us. We were living in our own apartment. When I think about it, it was kind of sad, because we were almost alone. The apartment was empty. We didn't have furniture. We didn't have anything like, I guess, many couples. But we started working hard and I became very busy with my business.

I started doing a lot of sub contracting work for bigger companies when I saw that I needed to legally formalize my business. Because of that and because of my status... I was undocumented for actually thirteen years before getting my first permit. I knew a lot of Hispanic people, too, and they started asking me how I had started my own business, given the fact that I didn't have proper documents. I told them. They started asking me, "Can you help me do that?" I said, "Yes, why not?" Somehow, I started helping people to start their own business.

LD: When was that, about?

RL: Around 1993 and 1994.

LD: So right away?

RL: People started asking me why I had a business if I didn't have documents, and if that could be done and how it was to be done. Then, I realized that there was a huge opportunity in terms of fulfilling the needs of the Latino community, and, at the same time, helping us incorporate into the system with the goal to make everyone aware that we could do this.

The purpose of helping people to start businesses was not only to provide them with an economic opportunity, but, also, to make everyone aware that we could be contributors to society rather than becoming a burden, which was the most common belief by most of the people. At the same time, in 1992, an effort was being done by the Hispanic ministry to open the first Latino church in Minneapolis. I remember Deacon Carlos Valdez. He went early in January 1992 to invite all the Latinos that went to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church to the first service in Spanish that was going to be provided at Saint Stephen's Church in South Minneapolis. I attended it. That was probably around April or May in 1992. I believe that probably no more than a couple dozen people attended, but, to our surprise, in less than three months, the church already had 1200 people.

LD: Wow. Twelve hundred?

RL: Why? Because we hadn't realized the enormous growth that Our Lady of Guadalupe had experienced in terms of numbers of people attending the Sunday service was because the people not only went from Saint Paul, and from West Saint Paul, but also from the west metro area. Living in Minneapolis, I knew that there was a community here, but they were not congregated the same way they were in West Saint Paul. We were living all over the place. You could find Latinos in Brooklyn Park, Brooklyn Center, Crystal, New Hope, north Minneapolis, south Minneapolis.

There was only one particular store that sold tortillas in south Minneapolis, which was not even Hispanic. They were Lebanese people at the corner of Blaisdell Avenue South and Twenty-Eighth Street. They were the only grocery store that sold tortillas, because they were in the middle of a few apartment buildings that had Latinos living there who worked at the local meatpacking company called GFI America. That particular company, I believe, recruited people in other places to come to work here in Minneapolis. All of the people fulfilled their needs at the only three grocery stores that were in Saint Paul that provided goods to the Hispanic community. Those were George's Mexican/Lebanese store, and El Burrito Mercado, and I believe it was El Rey, a grocery store that was owned by Mexican people that lived in Milwaukee [Wisconsin]. They, later on, sold it to somebody else. They changed the name. It was sold another time, and again. It has changed ownership several times.

But, here in Minneapolis there was not a single Latino business. The first Latino businesses were started in 1994. Before that, if we can call them Latinos, there was a restaurant at the corner of Dupont Avenue South and Lake Street called The Two Pesos. It later closed and was reopened under the name of Taco Cabana. Then, it changed ownership again, and it went to Italian, I think, and, then, French. I don't know what it is right now.

LD: [chuckles]

RK: The other one was a Taco Bell that was across the street from Best Buy on Dupont Avenue South, too.

LD: Does that count? [laughter]

RK: If we could call it Mexican or Hispanic, both were the only Latino-looking or sounding businesses on Lake Street.

LD: Yes.

RK: There was a bar at the corner of Fifteenth Avenue South on Lake Street called Fernando's. The name is Hispanic, actually, but it was a bar where a lot of criminal activity happened.

Drug activity and prostitution. It was closed several years later. It doesn't exist any longer. Those were the only ones that looked or sounded Latino.

Then, I had the opportunity to buy my first home, and I moved to northeast Minneapolis.

LD: When was that?

RL: In 1995. I lived there for five years. I remember that when I moved there, the first week of being there, I was invited to a meeting organized by the block club leader. The first comment they made was that there are many new people moving into the neighborhood. We don't know who they are and why they moved into our neighborhood, why they chose our neighborhood. My daughter was one year old. She was born here in Minnesota in 1994. This meeting was in 1995 when I moved to northeast Minneapolis. I took her with me to that meeting and I told them, "This is my daughter, Nora, and I am Ramón. I was born in Mexico. I'm an immigrant to this country. I just bought this house. I intend to live in peace. I intend not to bother anybody. I will require the same courtesy. I'd like to help as much as I can and, at least, let me know if I can do anything. I expect, also, to be helped if necessary. I'm no different than you. I also dream and breathe and listen to music. I eat a little different food, and I listen to a little different music, but, I, also, feel the same way you feel." I believe that first meeting was very important, because that opened the doors. They saw that I didn't have bad intentions, that I took my little daughter with me. I started fencing my property, planting my tomatoes and my plants. They were in the house, and they saw me improving and changing the roof, making a new driveway, and fixing my house. They saw that I was no different than them.

I remember this particular neighbor... I used to live in one corner and he used to call me from the other corner, which was several houses down, almost like if we were on a hill, and saying, "Hi. Good morning." Then, I realized that I was already part of the community.

LD: That's wonderful.

RL: As I said before, they raised those questions first. It takes courage from us and it takes courage from them to raise those questions.

LD: Right.

RL: I believe that more courage should be promoted in our communities in order to overcome that fear. Us humans fear what we don't know, but once we know, we are more comfortable and relationships improve.

LD: Yes. That's a very inspiring story.

In 1995, you moved. You have your business. What was next for you? How long were you primarily in the upholstery business?

RL: I made my first furniture set when I was eleven years old.

LD: Sure. I am thinking here in Minnesota though.

RL: In Minnesota, first of all, I rented a garage in order to make furniture in south Minneapolis. Then, when I moved to northeast Minneapolis, I used my two-car garage. That's why I made a new driveway, because the garage was used for business purposes.

But I, also, have other businesses. One of them was called Mex-Am Vending. It was Mexican and American snacks and candies in vending machines. I had several of them in different places across the Twin Cities. I had them in places where there were a large number of Latinos working there. Why? Because those were filled with Mexican snacks and candies. Because of that, I met a lot of people.

Also, because I attended church every Sunday, I knew that several organizers were trying to precisely do that, to organize the community, so I became involved. Well, I wasn't really involved. I was helping other people to start their own businesses or give them advice on how to or helping them by linking them with organizations that provide these opportunities, the local CDCs, which is Community Development Corporations.

I learned that these gatherings were aimed at finding out what the issues the Latino community of newcomers were facing in order to overcome them. I remember we had, we called it, Latino campus. It was formed in 1996. We met several times. Then at the end, we had a retreat in 1996. We spoke about the issues. The issues that we identified that we thought we should all focus on, and work on, were the immigration problem, health and educational issues, and economic development issues. That was when I proposed the formation of an organization that would address economic issues. Why? Because the first issue that came to the table was the immigration issue. Everyone said, "Let's work to change the immigration laws." I recall that I told them, "But you cannot change it unless there is a very well-organized effort that goes from the ground up, not from the top down, as you want to do it."

LD: Right.

RL: "Besides, in order to do that, we need to build power, which we don't have. That power is economic and that power is political, which we don't have." We proposed to form this organization. Back then, I called it CABDE, which was Comite de Auxilio Bilingue Desarrollo Economico.

The idea was turned down. Because they knew I was a business person, the comment was, "You are a business person. You only care about money."

I said, "It isn't that. What I'm talking about is social responsibility and building power, economic power, for the purposes of effectively addressing the social issues that we are facing. We could convert that economic power into political power, and proactively pose these issues and solve them, once we're recognized as contributors of society." I even

mentioned, "You could gather tons of people outside of anyplace, any government office, they won't pay attention to you unless you have political power inside...encourage deals with local government. You need to educate them on our issues. Sometimes, they make mistakes. They make decisions that affect us in a negative way without knowing what our needs are because we don't address them. We don't tell them. We need to do that. We had not done that. We cannot react with anger, expecting them to understand what our issues are. We need to educate them on that."

At the end, we decided to form the Joint Committee on Immigration. That was a focus on changing immigration laws. I also formed the Economic Development Team. I knew that there was a group already that was interested in opening a mercado. I was not involved at the beginning because my business didn't fit into a mercado. It was a furniture related business. It didn't fit.

LD: Sure.

RL: I said this to the group, "I will go to that group and I will work with them, because that is the way to go to build economic power." I became the chair of the board. That particular group ended up with the opening of the Mercado Central in 1999, after almost four years of hard work, hard work because not even our own community believed what we could do.

LD: Tell me a little bit more about that. You said you weren't at the very beginning involved, but became involved.

RL: I was aware of it.

LD: Then, how did you become involved with it?

RL: I attended the meetings, but I didn't get involved. I didn't want to do anything, because I was busy with my business, and I was busy with other, community-related issues.

LD: Sure.

RL: So, I didn't get involved with the Mercado. But some conversations caught my attention that made me consider that twice. When we were talking about educational issues, someone in the group said, "Our children aren't being properly educated, because they don't speak English well. They are segregated into corners. There are not bilingual teachers or aides who help us overcome that problem." Someone else said, "The worst part of that particular problem is the fact that some of them were born in a different country, and they won't be eligible in order to get higher education when they grow up because they lack documents, and because we don't have the economic means to send them to college." Someone else in that particular group also said, "I used to have a business in my home country. I don't know how to start a business here. If was given the opportunity and became successful, I will give back to those students so they can go to

college.” That got my attention, and I decided they are talking about social responsibility without knowing it. We need to start educating our own community. That’s why I decided to get involved, too. So I attended the meetings.

Capacity and talent inventories among our churches were being conducted already. I have to mention that Sagrada Corazón was formed in 1992, but almost immediately also was formed Holy Rosary [Catholic] Church, because of the demand. A lot of people started coming. Also, we have all the space. Other churches also were formed from different denominations, so the relief movement grew. That’s where we recruited most of the people for these activities and to address these issues, social justice issues.

LD: Yes.

RL: Those capacity and talent inventories were being conducted. I was attending the meetings where there was already, what we called, a sponsoring team that wanted to create a mercado.

LD: When was this?

RL: It was in 1994 or 1995.

When I, finally, became more engrossed in 1997 it was still sporadic because I was busy with my business. It was in 1998 that at the beginning that I saw that the project wasn’t going anywhere. Well, there was already a group that wanted to have a mercado. There were at least two CDCs that were providing technical assistance, financing, and everything else, and there were several organizations involved. One of them was Interfaith Action which was to provide leadership training to the leaders that were involved in those social justice issues. Also, Catholic Charities had assigned a community organizer to help us organize. That was Juan Linares.

Juan was working for Catholic Charities, and he was organizing the Latino community and working with people from Interfaith Action to recruit individuals we trained as organizers and leaders. John Flory was assigned to provide technical assistance to the project, and he was named co-director of the Mercado Central. Also, we had a name from the government center who we approached to give training to individuals that wanted to open up a business inside Mercado Central. There was, also, another organization called Project for Pride in Living, who offered to buy the building where the Mercado Central was going to be housed.

So I saw that we had all the pieces in place, but I didn’t see enough participation from my people. Everything they needed to do is just provide guidance to all the CDCs to receive what they needed in order to see the Mercado Central open, but that wasn’t happening.

When I saw that, I became the chair of the board and I said, “Let’s set up the criteria to accept members. Let’s recruit them. Under these criteria, then, we’re going to train them, too, just to mention what we did to the project. Let’s provide guidance to the builders of

the building. Let's provide guidance to the CDCs so they give us the tools we need, putting together a business plan and the finances that we need to open," not the project but our individual businesses. "And, then, let's plan the opening, and let's promote it." It was very difficult because a lot of people were involved and although the people thought we all spoke Spanish—there are cultural differences. We come from more than thirty different countries.

LD: Yes.

RL: The reasons why we came to this country are, also, different.

LD: Right.

RL: Some of us came for economic reasons. Some of us came as political refugees. Some of us came because of studies, to be a student.

LD: Sure.

RL: Some of us come with a high educational background. Some of us don't have educational backgrounds. Some of us belonged to the government in power in our home countries. Some of us belonged to the opposite side. Some of us spoke English; some of us didn't. Just finding the right language, common ground, was difficult. We both agree we want to go together and seek everything we need in order to achieve this. We need to forget for now everything else. We are at the table discussing this. Let's focus only on our common goal. Then, after we finish that, we can address our individual goals. That was difficult. We had people from Honduras, Chile, Ecuador. Most of them from Mexico in the beginning refused to accept other people. Then, I had to be stronger and tell them, "Listen, we are committing exactly the same mistakes people in power have committed against us. We need to break that cycle."

LD: Yes. So how do you find that common ground? What were the topics that bound you together?

RL: At least we agreed that we were seeking economic opportunity. They saw, because of my previous experience working with people, helping people start a business, that I knew what I was talking about.

LD: Yes.

RL: And they knew that if I could help, I would help them.

At least we had several things in common. We came from a faith community. We came willing to do anything in order to succeed. We were willing to learn. We were seeking economic opportunities. We were also trying to eradicate the false perception the community had about immigrants, in this particular case, of Latinos being a burden to the community. No, we know that we are not in charge. We know that we are contributors to

society. We need to be more intelligent about how we tell our story and how we convince them to help us incorporate into the system. That was what we started to set up, the common ground that we are talking about. We made a commitment to keep working on that.

I have to say that after we established the criteria, I told them then, “Let’s hold the sponsoring team, the board of directors, to these criteria because some of us might be out. That happened. Of the people that were working there, certain ones were left out because they didn’t fulfill their requirements. They were mad. I said, “Well, you established the criteria. You shouldn’t have set it up so high, so difficult that you couldn’t pass it.”

LD: [laughter]

RL: How come you put obstacles in front of other people that you don’t want?

LD: Right. I imagine setting up responsibility...

RL: Either make it difficult for everyone or make it easy for everyone.

LD: Yes.

RL: But if you are looking for something particular, let’s see what the composition of the Mercado is, first of all, how it is managed, how they make decisions. Then let’s set up the criteria in order to recruit members, but don’t take it for granted that you are a member already.

LD: Right.

RL: You have to serve as a volunteer for a higher purpose.

LD: [laughter]

RL: They were mad at me. But I was challenged.

LD: This is 1998 and, then, in 1999...?

RL: In October 1998, I remember I told the group—we were meeting every month—“No, let’s meet every two weeks, because there are a lot of decisions that need to be made.” Then, I told them, “Let’s meet every week, because we need to push. It has been three years, so we can move anywhere.” I told them in January 1999, “We need to have at least eighty percent of the membership if we’re going to have formal elections. We need to have formal representation before the CDCs that are helping us.” We did that and, then, we helped those organizations so they will keep helping us. We also finished the recruitment.

We also started pushing the real estate developer to finish the renovation, because he had taken too long. We told him, “We are planning to open in April, so if you don’t have the building ready, we’ll start seeking for another building.” We met with the executive director of that organization back then, and he said, “We’ll do everything we can, but we cannot promise anything.” We agreed that we were going to open in July, and he agreed that they would have the building ready in July. We opened on July 31, 1999. People were still working there doing the last little details with hinges on the doors and everything else. The inspectors were there giving the last inspection to the building, but we opened on that particular day.

LD: How many businesses did you start with?

RL: We started it with only forty-two, but there were five additional businesses that came later. At the beginning, we had decided we would take only the first floor. On the second floor, the local real estate developer was going to be in charge of managing it, but we had such a big demand from our community that we, also, had to develop the basement.

As a matter of fact, my business didn’t fit into the project, so I went to the basement. That was ironic because I was working really hard for the project and I didn’t have the space there. But I didn’t care because I knew the risk. Everything I wanted is just to help this goal, to help somehow make this work, and, then, go back to my business. My business, in the meantime, was giving me the means to survive. I had contracts with big hotel chains and restaurant chains, so I wasn’t very concerned about my economic situation because I have those contracts. But, because of these activities, I started to forget about my business and not paying proper attention to my business.

So in 1999, after we opened, I stayed there. We identified different challenges related to the management of the building and everything else. In 2000, in April I believe, the Mercado Central received an award as the community project of the year, and I learned because of the preparation of our taxes and everything else that the Mercado had sales of over \$800,000 in the first three months of operations.

LD: Wow.

RL: I said, “I believe my goal has been achieved here. It’s time to move out.” I’ll leave it to them. People there at the Mercado didn’t want me to leave. I said, “No. I did what I could already. It is *your* Mercado. I need to move to the next one.”

Back then, with the same business that we working in our churches, we were talking about forming the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. In 2002, there was a parallel effort, but all the Latinos professionals became licensed, so we decided not to pursue formation of a Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, but, instead, a CDC that would help us to achieve all of those goals that we had.

In 2000, I called several leaders from different fields in the community, from the educational organizations, from bank institutions, from all the CDCs, and I asked them,

“We have this vision, and you have seen The Mercado Central. You have seen that we have social service organizations. You have seen that we have all these wonderful Latino foundations and organizations. What else is needed in the community? What’s your vision for our communities in twenty years?” There was, particularly, a lawyer who no longer lives here in Minnesota, who said, “We need a Latino bank. We need our own Latino institutions.” There was somebody else who said, “We need a scholarship program to serve the Latinos that won’t be able to get a higher education.” There was someone else who said, “We need to promote economic opportunities like Mercado everywhere else.” That was the base of the formation of the organization, those visions.

LD: You mean, when you say organization, the LEDC?

RL: Yes, the Latino Economic Development Center.

LD: Okay.

RL: We needed an organization that would help us achieve those goals. We realized that other organizations weren’t going to do that for us.

LD: Right.

RL: We realized that Latinos needed to take ownership of our own issues and to solve our own problems. They needed leadership to take the responsibility of solving our own problems and growing our capacity for our own organizations in our communities. We needed to do it responsibly in a disciplined way. This organization was committed to that.

At the beginning, I never envisioned becoming the head of the organization because I was still thinking I was going to go back to run my business.

LD: [chuckles]

RL: But, then, I realized that I needed to have a more active role for the formation of this organization and I needed to start forgetting about my business, because there was no time to do it any longer. So I decided to close my business. I finally closed my business in 2003 formally, and I dedicated full time to the development of this organization, which, by the way, received ratification by the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] in December 2006.

LD: So in 2003, you got your wish. [chuckles] Tell me, what was the scene like as far as Latino businesses? Do you have any numbers on maybe how many? Before you were saying, at that time, the Taco Bell and the other one, were the only Latino businesses. In 2003, do you know how many there were?

RL: More than 300.

LD: More than 300.

RL: Just on Lake Street.

LD: Wow!

RL: Well, I won't say that. Minneapolis is more [unclear]. In 1999, the Mercado Central opened with forty-two businesses. That was July 1999. In September the International Bazaar opened with twenty-seven Latino businesses, too. But in 1996, La Terraza opened. They had like at the beginning six Latino businesses. Then they grew to more businesses. Also, Nicollet Avenue started seeing the formation of many Latino businesses, and, also Cedar Avenue South and Bloomington Avenue South. It maybe went from Lyndale Avenue South to Hiawatha Avenue South, or was it Thirty-First Avenue South?

According to the Economic Center in 2002, there were 2500 Latino firms in the State of Minnesota. What we are talking about is the visible businesses, the ones that needed a store front, but they are not necessarily the only businesses where the Latino community has a presence.

LD: Sure.

RL: We have helped here at the organization to form businesses in the construction field, the services field, the janitorial field, different fields that don't necessarily need a store front.

Also, another fact, an important fact, that I would like to add is that some of those businesses that were formed in 1994 to 1996, we helped them get the financing with a \$10,000 micro loan from one of our sister organizations. Right now, some of those businesses are making several million dollars in sales. They are in Saint Paul. They are here in Minneapolis. They have multiple locations. They have been able to start a jewelry store, for example, to a radio station or a grocery store. There are several businesses that could fit that because they have four or five restaurants.

It all began as an informal group of Latino people that got together to seek economic opportunity, to seek and link people with economic opportunities. It was in 2000 when we decided to form the Latino Economic Development Center as a program within an existing organization with the intention to become an independent organization with our own status, and with our own vision, and board of directors, and to give the responsibility back to the community. You are responsible for your own growth.

LD: Yes.

RL: That happened in 2003 when we received our status from the IRS as a 501(c)(3).

From that point in 2002, we had helped a lot of people already without being an organization.

LD: Yes, yes.

RL: The organization began as membership-based organization. We had to limit the number of members at the beginning because I was the only one working, and without funding. Basically, I started the organization with \$10,000 micro grant that I got from LISC [Local Initiatives Support Corporation]. One of the rights that every member acquired when they became members was the right to receive up to twenty hours of free technical assistance.

We had 8300 businesses in Minneapolis, and all of them wanted to be members. Multiply that by twenty. That's how many hours I needed to work.

LD: [laughter]

RL: So we said, "No, no. We won't receive more than thirty members. Even with that, I was busy, because I was in charge of forming a new organization. Remember my business? Well, forget my business. [chuckles] I received a lot of help from John Flory and from people where I took advantage of their good will, like my sister Sonia León. She worked for free. I took advantage of people that would do it, because they had a heart to do it, not because they were seeking an economic benefit.

In 2002, I had raised almost \$190,000 and that was when I had this struggle. I needed to decide whether I pay the salary to myself or I hire people, and I decided to hire people.

LD: [chuckles]

RL: I couldn't hire anyone for peanuts. I needed to pay them at least a decent salary.

The organization grew 100 percent every year, every year, for the next following years, and we moved to this building in November 2004 as part owners of the building. My previous office was an eight-by-eight office. We moved to this place in 2004 as co-owners of the building.

In 2006, we opened the Midtown Global Market as co-owners, too. We own twenty-five percent of that, which is an \$18 million dollar project. We started the community organizing in December 2002 for the Global Market.

LD: I want to get to the Global Market in just one second. I just have a few more questions about LEDC. From the twenty that you had to limit it to when you first started, how many organizations are members today?

RL: Businesses.

LD: Businesses, yes.

RL: According to our records, we have more than 550.

LD: Wow.

RL: But, only 350 are active members, meaning that they are the ones receiving technical assistance or training on an ongoing basis, or they pay dues.

LD: Okay.

RL: Most of the businesses are in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. We have recruited members from the Greater Minnesota areas because of capacity. I have to mention that in Greater Minnesota, we had to focus on building a capacity in those Latino communities rather than us going to provide the direct technical assistance. So we have trained seven individuals as community organizers and business consultants to provide service in Greater Minnesota working for other organizations.

LD: Then, they go out and train the people?

RL: Yes.

LD: It's like a train the trainers program that you have.

RL: We have that on a national level. When we opened the Mercado Central, we had groups come from different states - groups of Latino people that were pursuing the same economic opportunity. They asked us, "Can you help us with the same?" We always told them, "No, there's no room for that organization, but we'll do it when we can." We've established a training program for Latino-led organizations that have the interest in starting something like Mercado Central or co-ops. Because of that, we trained in 2000 ten individuals, who attended from nine different states. This year, I believe it was a similar number. People from Idaho, from Washington State, from Washington, D.C., from Oregon, from Wisconsin. People from many different states have come to that training.

LD: As far as the 350 members that are active, besides training, what are some of the other activities that you do or resources that you provide?

RL: Financially, we are responsible for our own growth. We provide business assistance, meaning that we help them get the licenses, the permits needed in order to start and run a business legally in the State of Minnesota. We provide, also, financial assistance. We have thirty-five different trainings for different areas. Most of these individuals were not employees in their home countries, so they probably don't know how to train employees.

LD: Right.

RL: They don't know anything about labor laws or immigration laws. We need to teach them.

LD: Yes.

RL: Also, when they are successful, they face how to grow their business, the issue of how to grow their business and how to build the capacity of their own business, and the issue to promote people that are good employees but not necessarily good supervisors, or good accountants, or good bookkeepers, or good anything else. So we train them. We actually started training people because the owners of those businesses that we help to open the business, they came to us and said, “Can you train the cook as a bookkeeper, because he’s good with numbers?”

LD: [laughter] I see.

RL: Then we started providing, first of all, development related training.

The organization became a CDC, a CDFI, and a OIC, three different licensures which are difficult to obtain.

LD: Can you explain those three?

RL: CDC is Community Development Corporation. CDFI is the nomination you get from U.S. Treasury Department. It means certified Community Development Financial Institution. OIC means Opportunities Industrialization Center.

In the State of Minnesota, there is a Minnesota State Council of OICs, and there are five OICs. The State of Minnesota allocates a certain amount of money every two years to these councils. That money is dispersed among the five OICs to provide work first, then development, and training at different communities. In this particular case, the LEDC was recognized as one of them to go with training in Spanish to Latinos. But there are others: the Anishinabe OIC, which in the northern part of the state to provide these opportunities to Indian Americans; the Indian American OIC, which is in South Minneapolis; the Summit Academy, which is providing these trainings to the African American communities; and the Northwest Metro OIC.

In that particular regard, we can say that if a person comes to the decision, they can be trained either to start a business or to find employment or improve their chances of retaining a job. I have to say that people that come here looking for an opportunity to start a business don’t necessarily become business people. Not every person should be a business owner. Sometimes, it is better that they be employed somewhere else; otherwise, they lose their savings.

LD: Right.

RL: The benefits sometimes are greater as a business owner, but, also, the work that you have to do is greater. A business person has to work longer hours. A business person, no

matter what, they have to do whatever it takes in order for the business to become successful.

LD: Yes.

RL: If you aren't more comfortable receiving a paycheck every two years, you better stay there working where you are.

LD: Yes.

Now, I want to get to the greater benefits of the work that you've done socially, etcetera, but, first, I want to ask a little bit about the Global Market. Tell me a little bit about the project and LEDCs involvement in that.

RL: When we were working on the formation of the organization, we were concerned because we heard rumors that a national retailer wanted to open a 40,000 square foot Latino grocery store on Lake Street in the second largest building in the State of Minnesota, which was the Sears Tower.

LD: Right.

RL: At that time, we had already several successful Latino businesses that we thought wouldn't be able to compete with a business of that size.

If you remember, Lake Street was full of criminal activity that lasted several decades. There were shootings from car to car, prostitution, drug activity. In the daytime, it was impossible not to become a victim of some sort of criminal activity.

But, it was in the mid 1990s when Latinos started opening our businesses on Lake Street, not because it was the most beautiful place to be, but because it was the most affordable place to be.

LD: Sure.

RL: There were a lot of empty boarded-up houses and a lot of empty store fronts, and grants were really cheap. They were affordable for us. The logical decision was to start a business there, not without a struggle, because we had to fight for it. We established our presence against all odds on the largest commercial core in the State of Minnesota, which is Lake Street...4.8 miles long.

By 2002, we had 217, or whatever the number is, Latino businesses. So, then, we're making very good sales already. We had more than \$300 million in buying power in the Latino community here in Minneapolis. That national retailer chain knew it. A business of that size with that economic power would have taken the customer base from the smaller businesses, and it would have killed those smaller businesses. Also, we will run the risk of going back all the years it took us to get rid of the criminal activity.

When we learned that, we had a moral choice to make. What do we do? We have limited capacity as an organization. The organization is not an independent organization yet. But, we know this that we have a moral obligation, to at, least inform our constituents of what will happen.

We called for a meeting to the business community in December 2002. Probably between fifty and sixty Latino business owners came to that meeting. We invited the city council member and the person in charge of redeveloping the Sears Tower back then to give us information, the exact accurate information of what was going on with that particular development. In effect, they told us the city was considering the development of that building, and one of the interested parties was a national retailer chain that wanted to open up a Latino grocery store in 40,000 square feet on the first floor of that building.

Some of the most successful Latino business owners, they were outraged. They said, "Why didn't they think of us as potential owners or buyers? Why didn't they invite us? It took us ten years of struggles to have a more stable presence here, and, then, you bring a guy in to kill us."

LD: Yes.

RL: One of them said, "We *demand* to leave part of this whatever the development is going to be." Someone else said, "We ought to at least have an opportunity to compete."

They informed us that there was going to be a request for proposals from developers to renovate that building, which is seven stories high, and one or two meetings were needed to pass it. It also did include, basically, requirements that were difficult, and that included the area communities that live and work here on Lake Street.

So for the next year, I focused my efforts on convincing the neighbors, the local community organizations, the local neighborhood associations, the local business associations to help us protect the Latino business community, our neighborhood community after all. Some of them asked me, "Why should we consider what you are proposing? After all, we already have enough Latino businesses." I said, "First of all, I'm not proposing that we support more business. We already have enough. What I'm proposing is help us protect what we have, the progress we that has been achieved over the last ten years. How are we going to protect it and why? Well, let me remind you how it was years ago," and I gave a picture. "Do you know on this particular corner what it was? It was a drug dealer's store. What is it now? A Mexican restaurant. Do you see any difference? Do you pay attention to your property values? Do you pay attention to the community activity? Why do we need to keep it? Because when the giant business comes, it kills our particular businesses and it goes back to the same level of criminal activity." They immediately responded, "What do you want us to do?" "How can we help?" "Where do you want us to sign?"

LD: [laughter]

RL: They started bombarding the mayor and the city council members with letters demanding that these communities on Lake Street were included. They modified it and, also, said, “Anyone responding to this proposal also should include the development of a project that includes the ethnic diversity of the business community on Lake Street.” That’s why we were invited, basically, by the four developers that responded to the original proposal, so we had our means of participation for the Latino community there. The developer was Ryan Company. We already had a relationship. They wanted us to be partners of the development. So regardless of what the developer wants, we already had secured the presence at the Global Market.

The structure that we established was a non-profit-owned entity. We are a non-profit organization that developed the project that cost \$18 million, and we put it together with new market tax credits and historic building tax credits that were bought by a local bank. Each one of those non-profit organizations represent different communities; ours represents the Latino community. We own twenty-five percent.

I will say that for the Latino community, it became a political issue. After most of the community learned that we had fought and secured a presence there, the rest of the community will say, “Why the Latinos? Why not us?”

LD: Yes.

RL: But we didn’t have the intent to have a Latino project there. For us, it was about integration into the larger society. So talking to our partners, non-profit partners, we proposed the formation of something that integrated immigrants into this project. If you pay attention, the businesses that are in the Global Market are businesses that provide service to anyone.

LD: Right.

RL: To gain additional skills, you cannot open a Mexican restaurant, if you don’t aim to attract the larger community, if you don’t have bilingual personnel. If you don’t have an adequate market plan. If you are talking about selling to everyone, then you need to speak a language that is spoken by everyone, not only your own language. Not everyone is ready to do that. So I will say that the Latino businesses that start at the beginning, the next step is integration, and the next step after that is social responsibility. We have done that by establishing the Latino Scholarship Fund.

LD: Tell me about that.

RL: We raise money from the successful Latino businesses to provide scholarships for Latino students who face legal and economic challenges to be enrolled in higher education.

LD: When was that established?

RL: It was in 2003 that we established an endowment within the Saint Paul Foundation, which supported program operations for the first three or four years. We currently have an endowment that I believe is over \$100,000. Our dream is that some day, we get to a million dollars. Of this, \$50,000 will go back to the community; the interest that is generated by that money will go back to the community. It is a perpetual endowment, so it will benefit people forever, they might not be a Latino. It can be anyone else. The purpose right now is to serve Latinos, help Latinos to overcome this immigration problem. Who knows what community in a hundred years is going to be the one benefitted? We want to benefit people that are facing similar challenges. Over the last five years, we have provided scholarships in the amount of more than \$80,000 to more than twenty students—actually exactly twenty-three students—that otherwise wouldn't have gone on to higher education.

LD: Wow.

RL: The amount of scholarships is the average of \$3500 each.

LD: I want to talk now about... It's funny, because I feel like I could ask ten more questions about each organization, but I really want to get to the heart of the social justice issue - really looking at the challenges that the Latino community faces and how you've addressed those challenges through the work that you've done. So, first of all, let's talk about today. From when you first came, there were three businesses, and, now, there are hundreds. What are some of the challenges that Latinos still face in the metro and in Greater Minnesota? This can be broad challenges. It doesn't have to deal with just economics.

RL: Well, first of all, talking about social justice is difficult.

LD: Sure.

RL: We have partners but none of us hardly have the same vision or a vision of addressing social justice. These are all different entities, and the challenges that constituents face are different than the ones that we face. So that's one of the reasons why I believe we should be in charge of addressing our own issues and overcome those issues and finding the solution that benefits us all.

LD: Let's talk about what are those issues.

RL: First of all, when we formed the organization, the people that came to our first community meeting were the Latino communities that live in East Saint Paul. They said, "Can you help us access the same opportunities that you have, but do it in East Saint Paul?"

Juan Linares, and I held the first economic summit at Sacred Heart Church in 2000, because of such, Plaza Latina was opened with 12 businesses in 2002. Other people also

came to Mercado Central for the same opportunities. I always referred them to the local organizations that provided technical assistance in Spanish or a bilingual format. Those CDCs are geographically based, so if you came from a different geographic area, you won't be served.

So I always told them, "There's a local CDC in your neighborhood. Go there and argue for assistance." They will always claim, "They are racist." "They don't understand my issues." "They don't speak Spanish." "They don't..." many things.

But we also have to recall that sometimes we blame on anything our own inability to solve our own problems. So one of the challenges of the organization is to hold our own people accountable. Okay, they don't speak Spanish. Shouldn't Jews speak English? After all, we are all in the United States. When I started out here people were coming to me bringing me everything, the letters they got in the mail for me to read to them.

I said, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I already helped you register your business. I already got your technical assistance. I already got your licenses, permits, and everything else. You aren't really doing your job. You want me to read a letter here? You want me to be a translator of your letters?"

LD: [chuckles]

RL: Can you imagine that? I can't do that. "I will read these letters for you today, but I expect you to enroll in English as a Second Language class. Do you know what you are costing me? You are taking from me time that someone else needs for a more important problem - not that this is not important." Sometimes, it was a letter from the license department saying, "We're going to shut the business down." They would recognize that, oh, yes, he's right. I should read it. Sometimes, I drove them somewhere, because they didn't drive. I told them, "I'm going to be your driver today, but I expect you to drive your own car in a couple weeks, in a month, whenever you can. But do it as soon as possible, because I need to do something else. I am not responsible for that; you are." That's why I made a lot of enemies, too.

LD: [chuckles]

RL: But, after all, those enemies are not enemies any longer. They are the ones that support my work the most when they understood what I meant.

LD: Right.

RL: I didn't mean to be mean. I respect other's time, so they should respect other people's time, too, and they should take their own responsibility.

LD: Correct.

RL: Going back to the issues... We conducted an annual survey of our business community. First of all, when I started we were asking the question, "What are the social and economic issues that you face that prevents you from starting a business?" Then, after they have a business, every year, we ask the same question, "What are the economic and social issues that prevent your business from being successful?" They always mention, "Well, immigration rate," and "The town is dead. No customers. I'm going to have to close." Okay, now the challenge and the education piece is, "What are you willing to do in order to address that issue to the larger community, to the voting community?" "What is the effect of your business not being successful that translates to the larger community?" "They know that you pay taxes." Those taxes pay for the safety in town, the services in town. There are towns that rely on a meat marketing company, for example. That local meat packing company has seventy, eighty percent of immigrant workers. But, sometimes, it's being rejected. That's where we need to be more proactive and address that issue, making people aware that we could create more employment opportunities. As a matter of fact, for every single economic opportunity that's created and becomes successful, several jobs are created.

LD: Right. So immigration, education are issues.

RL: Yes. Those issues that I mention, that's the social and economic. Then, we come to other issues such as capacity building. Do they have enough financing to do expansion, for example? Do they have the right personnel to advance to the next step?

In every single successful business, we have three elements that are necessary: a good manager, a good worker, and a good investor. If those three persons are only one person, then it is extremely difficult to do it. You are a business person, too, so you know that.

LD: Right...my father knows. [chuckles]

RL: If you are only a worker, well, you have to assign the management to someone else, but you need to build economic capacity to pay that person to do that. Or if you are the investor, you are the big picture person. That's different than the worker. Some of us prefer to be workers. Why? Because that is an eight-hour shift, and you forget about management, and you forget about getting more customers, and you forget about where the company is going.

LD: Yes.

RL: If you want to be the big dreamer, the big picture guy, and decide to get to that level, you need to have good workers and good manager, too. [chuckles] But you can't be the three at the same time. It is extremely difficult.

We always tell our members that, so they understand the relationship of the business to the community. A business idea is just an idea. It doesn't become anything if you don't have the dedicated workforce and a committed customer base. Without that, what do you have? Just a business idea. Well, how do you improve your chances of your business

becoming successful? It is to treat your workforce well, give them opportunities, incentives, and everything else, and to give back to the community that is going to buy your product and make sure that your product fulfills a need. If it is only a luxury thing, it might be more difficult.

LD: Right.

RL: We always make them aware of that because that is key for their success.

Now, the other challenge is how do you become the spokesperson of your community in a proactive way? In Saint Paul, they know the benefits of the community, but they don't do it in a proactive way. They just are angry at everything. They don't know how to address it. We show them, educate them on how to do it. Do they have the time to do it? Most of the time, they don't. But, if they want their business to become successful long term, they need to do it somehow.

LD: Right.

RL: And they can affect those decisions by becoming involved in local chambers of commerce or the local business associations. Those issues that I mention, some of them can be only addressed or affected by voting blocks that only citizens can do.

All of the people that have a vision to become business owners face the same challenges, basically, the lack of access to capital, the lack of access to credit, and lack of access to training. There are a lot of reasons not to do this. The unique thing about us is that we do it in Spanish with the purpose of them taking that responsibility of learning the language they need to learn in order to do it without our assistance

LD: Right. So you're working yourself out of a job—eventually.

RL: No, because as long as there are immigrant people, the opportunity is going to be there.

LD: Sure. Tell me what gives you satisfaction.

RL: [chuckles] You know, I've been tempted to start something else many, many times. Someone said many years ago, "This is a thankless job. You'll never satisfy all the people. There will be always someone mad at you."

When I became the board chair for the Mercado Central, I told them, "The only promise that I can make to you is that I'm going to try not to affect you in a negative way the most I can. But there is always going to be something that you won't like. I warn you, when that happens, let's have a conversation before you start name calling and cursing and anything else." That's basically what I did. I remember when people used to call me names. "I have to have a conversation with you later. After that, if you still want to fight, let's go and fight."

LD: [chuckles]

RL: They used to be ashamed of their actions and they will rectify their actions after our conversation.

I'll just give you a specific example. When the building people came to Mercado Central to install the hood in the kitchen, for example, they needed the business person there to tell them where they exactly wanted it. I'm not a kitchen person. I'm not a cook. I don't know anything about the food-related business—at least that is not my expertise. I needed that person. That person who was not working that particular day and said, "I can't go." When that happens, sometimes, they came back and said, "Who made that dumb decision?" I said, "You know what? That was the only day construction people was going to come, and I asked you, I begged you to come that particular day so you could tell them where you exactly wanted that piece. That is expensive and they charge a lot of money to come to install it. I didn't choose that place because I thought, oh, well, if he didn't come, I'm going to do harm to him. Nooo! I had him put it there out of my best idea. That was my best guess. I made a mistake. Okay. It was not to make you mad when you didn't come. I needed you to come." "Oh, I had a lot of work to do." "Well, I did, too, but I came on my own because of you." When I made that decision and I made a mistake, I recognized it. They will apologize, and they will recognize that I wasn't acting with the purpose of hurting them or harming them.

That happens very often; because of money and politics, there's always someone angry.

LD: Yes.

RL: Because of the nature of the work that we do, other people will get mad, because I'm helping a similar business. I remember when we opened the Mercado Central International. We started to open in September. Some people at the Mercado Central will tell me, "You are a traitor because you are helping competition." I said, "You shouldn't tell me who I shall choose to help, first of all. If I'm helping them, I believe that they deserve the same help I gave to you. I gave you some of my time and I can give it to someone else that is in the same situation as you. Recognize it." Sometimes, I will say, "Enough! Enough of this. I don't want to run it again. I want to go back to my business and a different way of earning living."

But, then, there is someone comes and says, "Thanks to your work and the organization's work, I now have a different image, a different view of what the world is...two different worlds. For example, I used to be José or Pepé because I was a dishwasher. I'm now Mister..." whatever. Why? Because they have economic power! Everyone in the community knows that a person who has success in business is seen and treated differently. That's what happened. We saw people that didn't have any respect from anyone, and, now, they are highly respected. When they come and tell you that, and they tell you, "You were part of that transformation," well, you just have committed me to work another ten years.

LD: [laughter]

RL: When I started this work, I knew what it involved, and I was willing to do it. But, I had made the commitment not to dedicate more than five years to the movement. The problem with that is I did this for fifteen already. I don't know when it's going to end. [chuckles]

Regardless of how many sacrifices you make, there is always at least one single thing that makes it worth it to keep working.

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

RL: First of all, I'll be happy the day when everyone agrees that, regardless of race or color, we are treated with respect, when we are seen as what we are, contributors, when we are part of this whole society. It will be when we are not segregated, but we are a general part of everything, and we are working together to solve common issues, not the issues that are related to only one, or are based on history or ignorance.

LD: Yes.

RL: It is not for the Latino community. If you are asking what my hopes are, I wouldn't say for the Latino community. It's for the whole society. I want my children [Nora and Diego], which are Minnesotans but have a Latino father, to travel freely around the globe without being in fear, and to be respected and admired and not hated, and that's what I want for every single American. That is not the case right now.

LD: What do we have to do to make that happen? What needs to happen? What is the work that needs to happen?

RL: That is the real question.

LD: [laughter]

RL: People around the globe need to be aware that not all the people are the same, not all American people are the same, but there are people that are concerned about others, that are willing to sacrifice something of their own for the benefit of the whole globe. We should be less selfish. We usually tend to take care of our own needs first, which is fine to a certain point. If you are not in a good position, you won't be able to help anyone, but not at the cost of others. I want to give you this specific sentence: when we take more from the pie, someone else is going to be left with less. We should be aware of that.

LD: Yes.

RL: When we take resources that don't belong to us... That's what we are doing to all of this. We are leaving them without resources to survive. [pause] I don't know how to answer that question.

LD: I think a wise man would say, "That's the best answer to the question."

RL: [chuckles]

LD: It is an impossible question, but it's always interesting to hear people's first priorities.

RL: That has to happen everywhere in the world. There are people who live with nothing. There are people who are dying. There are people who have such an enormous amount of resources that it is ridiculous.

LD: Yes.

RL: What's the purpose of it? A lot of good could be done in a proactive way if people were responsible and accountable. Just do what is right for humanity and for our planet. If we don't have a planet, where are we going to live?

LD: Yes! I have just one more question. [chuckles] What do you hope for yourself in the future?

RL: Hmm. [pause] Well, I also founded the Institute for Economic Development of the Americas, which is for the purpose of taking advantage of the economic power that some Latino business entities have been able to achieve here to promote economic vitality in places that have been experiencing a high influx of immigration to the United States. They are also losing human capital. I believe there is a win/win opportunity here. I call it like that, because we we'll only focus on Latin America and we will start with Mexico. Why Mexico? Because it is the only country in the whole world that has more than twenty million people living in a different country. Once a model is built and proven to work, it will be exported anywhere in the world. I consider immigrants to be ambassadors of wealth wherever they go.

LD: Ambassadors of wealth?

RL: Yes, wherever they came from. I'm not talking about the United States. But if you pay attention, Marco Polo went to Venice to exchange goods.

LD: Yes.

RL: And then Asians came to America. Then, Europeans came to America. Immigration can be seen on different scales. It is always the energy that immigrants take with them to the new community that keeps communities alive. Of course, there are challenges, but mostly social. Why? Because we don't have the same customs. Because we don't have

the same language. Because they come from a country that used to be our enemy or whatever. But, those problems were caused by humans. It doesn't mean that it cannot be solved. I consider immigrants a good source of opportunities, not only in the United States but everywhere in the world, that are not fully exploited. In this global economy, right now, we could take even more advantage of that, because, right now, there are ways that people don't even have to meet in order to engage in business activity. I could buy, for example, something from a person living in another Latin American country, and I could pay from here, without us seeing each other, ever. He or she could send me the product via the Internet without any problem. Well, the same could happen in different parts of the world with different things. We must use a different way of doing it. If it is good and needs to be transported, that is another opportunity, too. Everything has to be balanced. The world institutions have to be balanced.

LD: So this... Tell me the name again?

RL: IDEA or Institute para Desarrollo Economic de las Americas or Institute for Economic Development of the Americas. That could be very difficult to see that happening, at least in Latin America and the United States.

I would like to further develop this, to be able to free myself to be able do it, and to share whatever I learn, and to travel to other countries. Last week, I had a person that came from Japan and wanted to learn about what we do with immigrants. She mentioned, "We have Brazilian immigrants in our country, and we don't know what to do with them. They are very good workers and everything else, but we don't accept them as the Japanese. Could you come and tell us why we should accept them? What you are telling me, it is what we should do." I said, "I don't know." [chuckles] I will go to Japan. I haven't gone to any other countries other than the United States and Mexico and Guatemala. That's it. But maybe we could export what we have learned and the mistakes we have done, so others don't make them.

LD: Yes.

RL: On the other hand, if there was a good thing to share it and replicate it, that will demand a lot of traveling and time that I don't currently have.

I'd like to spend more time with my family—my daughter is already sixteen years old—and I regret the fact that I haven't been able to dedicate a lot of time to them. I remember when I used to go hold her in my hands and that was yesterday to me.

LD: Yes.

RL: I didn't do things with them that I wish that I did, and, now, it's too late—but, never too late to dedicate more time to them.

LD: Right.

RL: This work is demanding, time demanding. I wish I could manage that more wisely. That's what I would hope. Also, my parents, I didn't see them for thirteen years.

From 1987 to the year 2000, I didn't see them. It was a big shock when I saw my parents with gray hair. When I left, they didn't have a single gray hair, and now it is totally different. They were not the same. I realized that I had lost something. I'm seeing that, again, with my children growing up, and that's what I'd like to dedicate more time to.

I would also like to go back to Mexico. When I was younger, when I was living there, I used to travel all over the country. I know every single state. I don't think I'm ever going to finish knowing my own country. Every time I go, I go to different places. I went to the most hidden places, to different communities. I lived with an Indian community in 1981, in the northern part of Veracruz. I was the only one speaking Spanish. I had to learn some Totonaca. I was, finally, accepted by them, because Indian communities in Mexico don't fully accept my species.

LD: Right.

RL: I'd like to do that, and I'd like to also work for indigenous communities. Because if the Mestizos are in bad shape. They are in a worst shape than us. [pause]

LD: So a lot of work ahead of you, still.

RL: Yes, but I wouldn't call that work.

LD: [chuckles]

RL: It will be more like visiting, not a formal work. I want to do that, but we aren't calling it work.

And coming back here. I don't ever think that I'm going to go back forever to the country where I was born.

LD: Is Minnesota home to you now?

RL: Yes.

LD: Why?

RL: As a matter of fact, once I am in Minnesota, I feel that I'm home. I recently went to Mexico for two weeks. Every time I go, when I return, finally, I'm home. It wouldn't make any sense that I went back to my home country, because the people that I knew when I was younger, some of them are dead already, and many of them are older. My parents are the only ones that live there. I have two sisters that live in Mexico City. But why it wouldn't make any sense is because, in reality, I owe my existence to my children, and they are Minnesotans.

LD: Yes.

RL: I don't see them going to live in a country they don't know. Would I want to go to a country where I would be alone by myself missing my own children's children, my own grandkids? No.

LD: Okay [whispered]. Do you have anything else to add?

RL: No!

I remember I talked to your dad once, and he asked me why I came to Minnesota, and I showed him this. I saw an ad in the paper that said, "Land for sale for at \$30 an acre," but I realized it was an ad from 1800 something.

LD: [laughter]

RL: I could have bought several acres. But we shouldn't make fun of the stuff that actually happened, right, at a cost to a different ethnic community here in the United States that was almost... How do you say that?

LD: Annihilated.

RL: Yes. We should remind ourselves of the mistakes that we're done in the past and not forget them. I believe that we, as immigrant Latinos here, have a unique opportunity to finally break the cycle, because every single community hasn't solved it – not the current communities, the established communities. If we don't allow the same things to happen to the next group of immigrants, we will break the cycle.

LD: Very good.

RL: That's it.

LD: Excellent. Knowing how incredibly busy you are and how valuable your time is, really I want to thank you so much on behalf of the Historical Society for taking the time to talk and give us this very valuable history. Thank you very much.

RL: If you have any other questions feel free to call me or email me, and I can answer it.

LD: Yes. This will be available for all Minnesotans to read and, hopefully, learn from.

RL: I forgot to mention that all of the work that we have done over the last fifteen years, twenty years, whatever, we have taken advantage of all the institutions that have traditionally helped communities, like faith-based communities. There's Bishop Harry Flynn. We were affiliated with the Catholic campaign for human development. We worked with faith-based institutions, with community-based organizations, with CDCs.

All of them have been formed for the purpose of serving communities. In this particular case, they kept serving communities. It was just a different community. They were not fully aware of who we are, but they were willing to help us. So it was not an accident. It was because they existed. We had formed this organization, yes. I don't know how long it's going to last. I don't see this organization being known as Latino Economic Development Center in fifty years. It's probably going to be called something else.

LD: Yes.

RL: Latinos were incorporated. We did what we were supposed to do. Then, we might need to serve somebody else. That's it.

LD: Excellent. Once again, thank you.

RL: *Gracias.*

LD: *Muchas gracias.*

[End of the Interview]

Lideres Latinos Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society