

**Heladio “Lalo” Zavala
Narrator**

**Lorena Duarte
Interviewer**

**October 18, 2010
Saint Cloud, Minnesota**

Heladio Zavala: **LZ**

Lorena Duarte: **LD**

LD: It is Monday, October 18, 2010 and I’m Lorena Duarte. I’ll be conducting the interview today. I’m here with Lalo Zavala at the Saint Cloud Public Library in Saint Cloud, Minnesota.

So, first of all, I want to say thank you so much for taking the time. I know you’re a very busy man. It’s a really important project and we’re honored to have you as one of the interviewees. So if you could please give us your full name and how to spell it.

LZ: Thank you, Lorena. This is a great opportunity for me to be able to share my experiences.

My name is Heladio De La Fuente Zavala, however, everybody knows me by my nickname of Lalo. Obviously, when people hear my real name, they will understand why I have a nickname such as Lalo. Nobody can pronounce my real name!

LD: [Chuckles]

LZ: So the easiest way to get my attention is call me by my nickname, Lalo. When people... when they hear my name, Lalo, they think my name is Geraldo or Eduardo. But it’s not Geraldo, it is *Heladio*.

LD: Just your date of birth. And your occupation?

LZ: I was born on June 17, 1949. I’m going to be sixty-two years old. Currently, I am the chief executive officer of MAFO. MAFO is a national partnership of farmworker and rural organizations we’re located here in Saint Cloud, Minnesota.

LD: Great. So I want to start off with your growing up. Where were you born?

LZ: I was born in Texas. As far as we can trace my family, my roots, I’m a seventh generation Mexican-American. I was born in the little town of Asherton, Texas. Do you want to know where Asherton is?

The town is located in what's called the winter garden area; that's what they call the area between Laredo and Eagle Pass, Texas. This will provide you an idea of its location.

LD: Yes.

LZ: It was a small town or should I say it is a small town. When I lived there, Asherton population was maybe twenty-five hundred people. The population, now, is maybe eight hundred people altogether.

LD: Wow.

LZ: Most folks my age or younger have moved out of Asherton. It's dwindling down and dying, although now you have some retirees returning.

LD: And tell me about your family. What were your parents' names?

LZ: My mother's name was Ramona Elida De La Fuente. Obviously, Zavala is my dad's name. My mother later married, a wonderful man, Julian Longoria.

LD: Yes.

LZ: My mom and my dad were never married. I was born out of wedlock. My mother raised me, along with my grandparents, Pablo Ayala and Maria Ayala. Pablo was my step-grandfather if there is such a distinction. But he (Pablo) was the closest to being my grandfather or the father figure, I had. My real grandfather, Carlos De La Fuente, lived close by. My immediate family was composed of four, really small.

LD: Did you have siblings?

LZ: No, not directly. However, my dad did have other children by from another marriage or relationships. My dad had had another child prior to me, her name is Petra. I knew who she was, but we never really lived together. Obviously, she had her own mother. My dad remarried—or married—after that. I don't know how many siblings there are. I think there's about six or so beside Petra.

LD: So, basically, you grew up as an only child?

LZ: I grew as the only child.

LD: Sure. So, tell me, what was your town like? What was Asherton like? What was it like to grow up there and how long did you stay there?

LZ: I left Asherton at the age of nineteen. My hometown—if you know anything about Texas, you know that Texas small towns grew because of agriculture. Our town was a product of the agriculture industry, and most folks had either large farms and were farmworker, who harvested

the fields surrounding my hometown. Agriculture was a year round operation, and farmworkers had a year round employment. Low wages and short hours were the norm but never the less, year round employment. Farmworkers traveled to different states or up to north Texas to do farmwork. Asherton was a farm workers community.

LD: Yes.

LZ: As farmworkers, folks would drive up to sixty miles away to do farmwork then returned each night. Farmworkers worked only a few hours a day, at a piece rate [10¢] for a bush of carrots, onions, etc. There was no industry other then farm work.

LD: Was it ethnically diverse? Or was it mostly Mexican-American?

LZ: Our population was ninety-nine and a half percent Mexicanos.

LD: [Chuckles] Okay.

LZ: In its heydays, Asherton was well known because of agriculture. It had two downtowns, separated between the Anglo downtown [El pueblo Americano] and the Mexican-American [El pueblo Mexicano] downtown. We had our own theaters—at that time, we had three theaters—they showed mostly Mexican movies. Mexican movies of the Mexican Revolution [La revolucion], Continflas and other Mexican movies were shown. At one time, Asherton was the county seat. However, later the county seat was moved to Carrizo Springs, about eight miles away. Asherton was a thriving town. We had hotels and a thriving business climate in the early days. As time went on, and agriculture became less prominent, then, obviously, the town died slowly as more and more and people started moving and going to other bigger cities or other states. Younger people moved to bigger cities. Larger families stayed in northern cities that had manufacturing, different industries and sought better paying jobs.

LD: But you say there was a separation kind of your own theaters, the white community's theaters. So was there tension?

LZ: I can't say there was tension. I never grew up with tension in my hometown because even the white folks there spoke Spanish as fluently as I did.

LD: Ah.

LZ: And we intermingled pretty easily, particularly, the younger generations. But there was a known fact that intermarriages and dating were a no-no between Mexicanos and Whites. I mean, as a Mexicano you knew that. Our past history demonstrated that they were the land barons, the land owners, and we were the workers and we do mix. As young people, we still mixed.

LD: Yes.

LZ: In our school student body we had two or three people that were white; that was it. There was one black family. So we were the majority, in a sense, but we didn't really treat anybody different.

When you went to other towns, *then* you felt that you were separate or different. If you went to Carrizo Springs, you saw the segregation of communities. I mean, neighborhoods were separated, the Mexican-Americans lived in one side of town, and the Anglo community lived in the other side of town. Anglo neighborhood had sewage system, paved roads as well as curb and cutters. The downtown was predominantly Anglo businesses; their staff had some Mexicanos but only a few. You never mixed. I mean, it was obvious.

LD: Okay.

LZ: To say that I experienced tension, in and out, every day in my life, I did not. Obviously, as farmworker, we traveled to northern Texas or came up north. Then, we did experience the looks and yes, people would make comments. We were quite aware of the different treatment. But I didn't experience tension in our school or in my hometown. No. It was a quite bit different.

LD: So you went through high school there?

LZ: At the beginning, I attended a parochial school, and then attended a public high school; I graduated from Asherton High School. I went to college up north, at Moorhead State University.

LD: Wait, I'm sorry. So at nineteen you left to go to college?

LZ: Right.

LD: And where was that again? I'm sorry.

LZ: Moorhead State University.

LD: Moorhead.

LZ: At that time it was called Moorhead State College.

LD: Not here in Minnesota?

LZ: Yes, here in Minnesota.

LD: Really! How come? Why Minnesota from Texas?

LZ: Well, like I said, we were farmworkers. And we used to travel during the summertime to harvest the agriculture fields either in Texas or northern states. Most folks made most of their yearly income from farm work. To make a living, folks or farmworkers travel vast distances to either what is called West Texas or the Panhandle of Texas and worked on potatoes, onions,

cleaning cotton, picking cotton or whatever. This is how farmworker made their most of their yearly income, or their living, as a matter of fact. They saved what they could and lived on that for the rest of the year and did odd jobs during the wintertime.

My family, in 1964, went to Michigan. I remember that year because the Beatles had just invaded America. We had heard about people going up north to work in the sugar beets and that they made more money than they would have if they had gone to the Panhandle of Texas. So that was our first visit to the northern states, I was a bit younger than. In 1965, my mother, grandparents and I came to Minnesota and worked in the sugar beets. We came to Minnesota for a number of years thereafter, working in the sugar beets fields most of the summer. After working in the sugar beets, we moved down to the Panhandle of Texas to harvest other crops before returning to our hometown. It was during those years that I realized I wanted or decided to attend college in Minnesota.

Actually, Moorhead State College had a recruitment program called Project Equality which did outreach and visited farmworkers in the fields or homes. In fact in the 60s, there were several colleges recruiting minorities. Stanford [University] was one of them; Harvard [University] was another one, and Moorhead. I didn't want to go to Stanford in California. Harvard was kind of, you know, I was kind of afraid of Harvard. I mean, what the heck am I doing at Harvard? Hindsight, maybe I should have maybe gone there. Hindsight always, you know, is best. Folks in Moorhead were friendly and I knew the area. So I decide on Moorhead. It was cheaper and I like the folks. Also, my folks would be coming up during the summertime. So Moorhead it was.

LD: So before we kind of get into that part in your college life, I just want to know a little bit more about what that was like. Did you work over the summer and then went to school? Or was your school interrupted by having to do farm work?

LZ: I am certain that you have read about farmworkers and their live interrupted because of family traveling and following the American harvest or crop production looking for work. Well, I lived during that era. I mean, most farmworkers left school early and then they return home late or after the harvest. However, I was lucky; my mother believed that I should get an education. So we weren't one of those families that left school early. My parents insisted that school be over before we left north and then we traveled. Obviously, we lost some income because of that. But then when school started, we were there beforehand. I never missed a day of school. At times, my grandparents would stay up north to work and my mother and I would return home in time for school. My mother was really pro-education. She saw that that was an opportunity for me—or for any kid—to go to school. So she was adamant about that.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Many times, my grandfather would in fact, stay up north or travel by alone to work. Or he and my grandmother would stay to harvesting sugar beets. Those were hard times. Regardless, my mother was able to funds which helped us survived during the winter months. My grandfather worked whatever odd jobs he had during the winter months. At times, he earned only ten dollars or fifteen dollars a week.

LD: And what was school like?

LZ: School? You mean High school?

LD: High school, grade school. What interested you? I mean, what put you on the college path?

LZ: That's interesting. My observation has always been that my generation during that time...let me go back a little bit.

LD: Sure.

LZ: We were young. There was a music revolution happening. I'm not talking about The Beatles; I'm talking about the 1950s.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Where music was premiere, kids were rebelling about what was happening in society. So they had their music. Rock and roll was becoming famous; rock and roll brought a whole bunch of different views all together. We had our own sock hops at that time where you couldn't dance with shoes in the gym, so you had socks, white socks, and everybody danced with white socks on. We were all Mexicanos. We wanted more.

Suddenly, we had Mexicanos as teachers, in the 1950s. Mexicanos teachers and they came and taught at our town... our class. They helped us and provide us with a different viewpoint that, yes, you can make it high school, in college and you're not dumb. Our classes were not that large. We were all Mexicanos. We *knew* that we wanted to learn, we wanted more. Whether we learned enough or not, we wanted to get out of there. When you were a farmworker, you always went to towns where you saw the segregation, the difference between communities or neighborhood; the green lawns and nice paint houses. You saw the disparity of what we had, and what they had. You wanted the sidewalks, you wanted the house painted—none of us had our house painted. That was a *luxury* if you painted your house—we did not have painted houses. We saw the difference. Our generation started looking at life from a different perspective. I did.

LD: Yes.

LZ: I thought, this is not for me. My folks were working their buns off and just making ends meet. As the youth, you wanted to get away, that prompted me to continue school and try harder. The atmosphere of the time, lend itself for us to change and aspire for more. We were all learning, we had some really smart kids, we wanted more. Don't get me wrong, the time was right. We were young and people were challenging themselves. All these, allowed us to not only dream but want more. So you were striving, you were part of the dream, you were part of the education. And so it was up to us to make it, but we had support from our families, we had support from the schools, and from the town, we had all that. That was pretty evident. But then you saw the *The Saturday Evening Post*, which was really popular, and you saw the difference,

the disparities. The [Post] clearly showed the disparities of our home town compared to different parts of the country and you wanted more. You wanted that! That in the picture!

LD: Yes.

LZ: Is there a difference between some other cultures? I'd say, probably not. During those times, there were a lot of poor people, regardless of where you were. But that was a driving force, because you wanted something better than what your parents had.

That's the force that drove us, I guess. And there were a lot of kids at my high school around that age that went to college. That's what we wanted.

LD: So you came to Minnesota for the first time, permanently—or semi-permanently—as a nineteen-year-old, but you had been in Minnesota before.

LZ: Right.

LD: When was, say, the earliest you can remember being in Minnesota? How old were you?

LZ: My parents came here before I was born. I don't know when I first came to Minnesota, I probably I was five or six. I do remember being up north where it was colder and there was snow on the ground. I can't say that it was Minnesota.

We lived in a barn and there were a couple of families, as well. It was snowing and we built a fire inside the barn, where we lived, to keep warm. To say that it was Minnesota, I can not. I do remember living in potato shack, as well, underground. That's where they kept the potatoes before they planted them or during the wintertime.

LD: When was the first time that you remember definitely being in Minnesota?

LZ: I came to Minnesota in 1965 to work and harvest sugar beets.

LD: When you came for college?

LZ: No.

LD: Okay.

LZ: Well, I didn't come for college at that time. It was 1969, when I came to college.

LD: Oh, okay.

LZ: But I was here in the summertime working the sugar beets, as a farmworker.

LD: Sure. And was there a difference between those first times that you remember, in 1965, to when you were in college? What was it like?

LZ: In the Red River Valley, we would always expect that in the summertime a lot of us would come. Our population [Mexican farmworkers] grew, I would say, twenty or thirty thousand in the summertime, most of us working in the fields, in the sugar beets. A lot of us would come in and work on the sugar beets, work on the corn harvest, and then work on the harvest the sugar beets, and then go back home. You saw this influx of Mexicanos coming in late May or early June, living in little shanties on farms or, lived whatever they find to harvest the crops. While in Texas, families would save whatever money they could to help make the trip north or maybe borrow from the Sugar Beet Company or farmers themselves. The Sugar Beet Company and fieldman would provide an advance of a hundred bucks, and with those funds you travel north. Most families would spend two months; thinning and hoeing the sugar beets before returning back home.

My grandfather had cataracts, so he couldn't see well. My family would hitch a ride or drive with somebody else. We came in the back of pickup trucks with our belonging as well as their. They would drop us off on a farm and we had no way to get around or go anyplace. My mother would make arrangements to buy grocery on credit in a local store in the local towns. We would even get the farmers to take to and from the grocery stores. But because of the influx of farmworkers in the area, small town stores grocery prices would go up or we would be charged higher prices.

My mother was a strong advocate, herself, and would say, "No, we've got to go to the stores in town where the prices are better and there a variety to select." Our family would borrow against of our earnings, since we did not get paid until the end of the harvest and we would go and buy our own food in town. My parents would borrow five or six hundred dollars. We'd work for sixteen or twenty days. You're working your butt off, from sun up to sun down. You worked from six o'clock in the morning, the break of daylight, until about six or seven in the afternoon or until you couldn't take it anymore. That was life, our life.

We knew that when we went to town, people pretty much would stay away from you. But summertime for us was the time we ate the best, because you were able to purchase different foods, vegetables, fruits, and meats that you normally would not have. My parents would always have a small garden in our home town and we always worked in vegetables. So we had a plenty of fresh vegetables, that wasn't a problem. The problem was that we never had the meats or other types of food. We didn't have the meats – you had only a pound of hamburger a week, if we had that.

You always got looks, you know. People would move away from you, go to a different aisle or pulled their kids away. People would give you that 'Oh, here are the Mexicans, again'. You always felt like an outsider. When I first stayed here, that was a culture shock for me.

LD: Yes. Tell me about that.

LZ: I've always been pretty adaptable. And the reason, I was never afraid to go places by myself. Also, I'd always been a pretty tall kid. I was skinny, but a tall kid. So people looked at me like, you know, that Mexicano is *tall*.

LD: [Chuckles]

LZ: There weren't very many of us, tall Mexicanos. Although in high school there were quite a few of us—I wasn't the tallest kid in my school, by any means. But there was a culture shock for me. When I was growing up, you never really went out with a white woman, as an example. That was a no-no.

Also, this were the sixties, things were changing all over. Not only attending college, but it was a different environment, community, as well as the 70s, the era of change.

LD: Yes.

LZ: When I attended Moorhead there were six of us, four males and two women who are Latinos. Some of us joined fraternities. We were trying to break those perceived barriers. It was not necessary, but we wanted to be accepted; we wanted to be acknowledged as a person.

LD: Yes.

LZ: I joined the Owls [Old Order of Owls], and a friend of mine went to the TKEs [Tau Kappa Epsilon]. We went to parties and that broke the ice for a lot of us. College students are more open-minded to seeing other people from different races. Also, these were the seventies.

LD: Yes.

LZ: The town was a little bit different. I mean, you'd go into a store and they would look at you... shouldn't you be in Texas now? That was a difference that I saw.

The other one - you know how people sometimes say, 'you speak [Spanish] too fast?'

LD: Yes.

LZ: Well, I always felt that Americanos spoke [English] real fast. When people would tell me that I was speaking too fast, I'd think, wow, I can't because I thought that we [Texan] spoke slower, being from Texas or the south. But remember, I grew up in Texas and in Texas we tend to speak slower. So go figure.

LD: [Chuckles]

LZ: On the opposite side. People I met would say, "I know Spanish." So I'll speak to them in Spanish and they'll say, "Oh, you're going too fast," and I'd say, then you don't know Spanish, really!

LD: [Chuckles]

LZ: But anyway, I couldn't always hear or understand the teacher or instructors. I don't know why. In high school, I normally sat in the back of the classroom since they usually set us in alphabetical order. But here, I made a point to sit up in front because I couldn't hear or understand them. It took me a while to understand northern idioms and language.

LD: Did you? So you grew up, obviously, speaking Spanish.

LZ: Yes.

LD: But you went to school in English, I imagine.

LZ: Right.

LD: But it was just that the English was so different here than what you were used to?

LZ: Yes. They did not speak English with a twang, a Texas twang, that's how I learned how to listen to it.

LD: Sure.

LZ: And here they didn't. They had their own accent, and their own way of doing things, and their own idioms. So I had to relearn English in a way. I had to listen *well* until I caught on. It took me about maybe a year and a half.

LD: And so what did you major in, in college?

LZ: You know, you always start with a different major.

LD: Sure.

LZ: I started with accounting. And that ended the first quarter. They gave us some problems, and we would stay up until twelve, one o'clock, just working on problems. I worked with a team on the problems. But I didn't want to be spending most of my time just *working on problems*. So I changed my major quickly.

LD: [Chuckles]

LZ: So I changed it. I had always been good in art, so I changed to Graphic Design and Spanish majors. After several quarters, I left the art major because I wanted to get involved with the community. Again, I changed it and went into social work and Spanish. If I had to do it all over again, I'd probably been business major.

LD: Oh, really?

LZ: Yes.

LD: Why is that?

LZ: Because everything's a business! [Chuckles] Everything you do.

LD: Ah! [Chuckles]

LZ: Everything you do.

LD: So once you graduated from college, what happened then?

LZ: What're we doing? We're jumping quite a bit.

LD: Well, so, you started in 1968, correct?

LZ: Well, actually I started in 1969.

LD: Okay.

LZ: 1969. Because I took a couple of months off. My community involvement while still in college.

When I was in college, I had an experience during my first year in college. I went to buy my books, and I saw this guy who looked like a Mexicano. So I go over to him right away and I spoke to him in Spanish. He looked at me with a frightened look. In fact, there were two guys, and they happened to be *Indios*, Sioux Indians, from South Dakota.

LD: Oh.

LZ: I said, 'Oh,' much to my own surprise, 'I'm sorry. I didn't know. Your guy looks like Mexicanos'.

LD: [Chuckles]

LZ: Well, I'd forgotten a book, so I went back to the bookstore again. Again, I saw another guy who looked like a Mexicano. I did a double take, as well as he. I thought to myself, I am not going to make the same mistake. That evening most Latinos students had been invited to a meeting by the Mexican American Youth Organization, MAYO. This organization had started in the early 1960s, with Mexican-Americans in San Antonio, Texas. And some folks had started or were starting a chapter in Moorhead.

LD: A chapter?

LZ: Yes, it was a chapter of MAYO. So guess who I run into. The last guy I had seen at the bookstore the last time there. We both exclaimed, almost in unison, “You’re Mexicano?” He said, “I thought you were Indian!” I said, “I thought you were Indian, too!” Both had encountered the same situation, I believe it was the same two guys, as well. Anyway, we introduce each other and I found out that he was from Carrizo Springs, Texas, a town about 8 miles northwest from my home town. What a small world. We have been friends ever since.

LD: [Laughs]

LZ: MAYO was my first involvement in the Chicano Movement. But you have to understand that the movement for us younger students started in 1964, when Mexican-American college students started questioning high school policies and issues. Prior to that, my mother had been involved in the G.I. Forum [American G.I. Forum]. My grandfather had been a World War I veteran and I had quite a few tios [uncles] who were World War II veterans as well. When the Mexican-American veterans return home their valor was not recognized, they were still not allowed into restaurants; they were not being treated well nor allowed to be buried in the military cemeteries. Mexican-Americans were not even second-class citizens. This issue and others were discussed in our home quite a often because of my mother’s involvement.

The G.I. Forum and MAYO were Mexican-American organizations addressing social problems faced by our community. Then we heard about the walk-out by high school students in Texas—in Crystal City, Texas and confrontations in other communities—and a revolt was occurring all over the country against mistreatment. People, “Hey, we won’t take it anymore”. MAYO was one of the original student youth organization prior to the Chicano Movement. In fact, they were the founders of the Chicano Movement.

LD: Sure. So you were already politicized.

LZ: Now mind you, as I mentioned beforehand, I never experienced race discrimination or tension in my hometown.

LD: Yes.

LZ: We were aware of the disparities and how we were treated outside our hometown. That’s when I got involved with our community. In the early 1970s, Migrant, Incorporated started and had several meetings in Moorhead, MN. Those meetings were my exposure to discussing farmworker and other community’s issues.

When [President Lyndon B.] Johnson became president he opened the Office of Economic Opportunity 1964 (OEO) and with it the War on Poverty. This office addressed issues of poverty throughout the country. Farmworkers were targeted as a special need population. Special national set-aside programs were implemented at the national level which funded organizations to provide services to migrant and seasonal farmworkers. These funds were the seed funds used to

start Migrants, Incorporated. Representation to this organization was composed by representatives from throughout the state of Minnesota.

LD: And this was before you graduated college?

LZ: Correct, before I finished.

LD: Okay.

LZ: While in college, I also became the chairman of Migrant Health Services.

LD: Was that an organization in Moorhead?

LZ: Well, let me go back a little bit and explained.

LD: Sure.

LZ: Migrants, Incorporated, I am uncertain how long it lasted as an organization. Most of its members lacked experience as board members and the staff did not have experience operating an organization, as well. Infighting and a volatile board of directors with self interests played a major role in the demise of the Migrant, Incorporated. Board members were divided between the urban and rural farmworkers and re-settled farmworkers, all this contributed to a non-functioning board. A split in the board happened between the folks in Saint Paul and the rural farmworkers folks. As a result of the split two different organizations were created the Minnesota Migrant Council as well as Migrants in Action.

During that time, Migrant, Incorporated received funding from President Johnson War on Poverty or Office of Economic Opportunity in the amount of \$127,000 for the state of Minnesota.

With the split of Migrants, Incorporate, the funds from the Office of Economic Opportunities — came with the Minnesota Migrant Council. A segment of the original board of directors from Migrants, Incorporated changed its name to the Minnesota Migrant Council, according to records.

The Minnesota Migrant Council moved its main office to Lewisville, Minnesota, south of the cities. At that time, that area had the most of the farmworkers. Some of the first farmworkers that came to Minnesota came to the southeastern part of Minnesota. Some of the earlier Latino settlers to the cities moved from areas of Owatonna, Hollendale, Blooming Prairie, etc.

I became involved, first, with Migrants, Incorporated in committees; thereafter, I worked with the Minnesota Migrant Council as an outreach worker during the summer, before I left college.

LD: What kind of work did you do?

LZ: At that time, the Minnesota Migrant Council was working and operating in two states, Minnesota and North Dakota. Our main focus was developing an accurate count of farmworkers in each state. We completed an application on each family and its family members. We did a basic assessment of needs, and provided support service to meet basic emergencies. After that first summer position, I became acting area director for the Moorhead area. I must have been about twenty-two. I was not hired as the area director but was hired as a Emergency Food and Nutrition Specialist (EFNS). In that position, I developed training workshops and providing classes on proper nutrition.

LD: And by this time you had graduated?

LZ: No.

LD: No, not yet?

LZ: I was still in college.

LD: Wow.

LZ: While in this position, I became the Chairman of Migrant Health Services. Migrant Health Services was founded by a committee from MMC. MMC had been researching other funding possibilities and established a committee to research and to prepare a proposal in application of the funds. I became part that committee. That committee organized into an organization and applied for funds and the Migrant Health Services was created. Migrant Health Services hired its' first director, Rogelio Villa.

LD: You were.

LZ: Yes. I was about maybe twenty-two, twenty-three at the time.

LD: So wait, I'm confused about Migrant Health and the other organization. So Migrants, Inc. split.

LZ: Right.

LD: And then there was the other faction, Migrants in Action?

LZ: Yes, Migrants in Action was one of the other organizations formed from the split of Migrants, Inc.

LD: And that was the one that you were a part of?

LZ: No. I was part of the Minnesota Migrant Council.

LD: I'm just making sure. So then what was Migrant Health?

LZ: Migrant Health became a different organization altogether.

LD: Okay. I wasn't sure if that was part of it or not.

LZ: But it was a committee set up by the Minnesota Migrant Council.

LD: Oh, okay.

LZ: That became a different organization, Migrant Health Services.

LD: I see. Okay, so you were working in all these fields. You were an outreach worker, but then you were also - what did you do as chairman of Migrant Health?

LZ: As a chairman you are responsible to conduct board meetings, promote strategy planning, and provide governance. You work with the board to develop monitor procedures, financial procedures and governing policies for the organization.

At the time, I was still working as the Emergency Food and Nutrition Specialist for MMC in Moorhead.

LD: Okay.

LZ: Migrant Health Services ran into a major financial issue. The issue was that we were not paying our bills on a timely manner. We had the funds, but the bills weren't getting paid. As a board, we are fiscally responsible for the agency and assure optimal operation of the organization. We brought outside consultants to review policies, procedures and the actual performance of work duties. The findings were that we had effective policies and proper policies and procedures. Staff was not paying the invoice on a timely manner causing disgruntle vendors, who were doctors and hospitals. We approached the director and he was reluctant to deal with staff. Board had an issue to address, who was responsible this mismanagement, the direct staff or the director. The board was split as to where to place the blame, was it the director or bookkeeper. From my standpoint, there was ineffective management. But after three, four months the problems still persisted and excuses were the same. The majority of the board made a very unpopular decision of firing the director. I chaired that meeting. There were friendships broken and bad feelings among board. It was a great learning experience, to say the least.

LD: Yes.

LZ: So we got let him go. Shortly after that I was hired by the Minnesota Migrant Council to become a planner/evaluator here in Saint Cloud.

LD: Planner/evaluator?

LZ: Planner/evaluator. I moved to St. Cloud.

LD: And what did you do? [Chuckles]

LZ: [Chuckles] As a planner/evaluator my job was to do a couple things; to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, implement program and monitor program progress. As an organization, we didn't have the capabilities we needed for a growing organization. Government funded programs were changing and requesting specific data that normally we did not gather. My second responsibility was to develop training manual focused on employment and training, provided in-house training to staff, supervised and monitors staff performance. And the last task was to researched additional funding sources.

LD: And had you graduated by now?

LZ: By that time I was done with college.

LD: [Chuckles] It's pretty incredible, all the experience that you got.

LZ: Right, right.

LD: And all the things that you did while you were still in college. Was that difficult, keeping that balance?

LZ: It was. You had college assignments as well as working almost full time. It created difficult situations and being young and inexperienced. And that was hard.

LD: Yes.

LZ: As a social worker, you are trained to not let your clients' issues and problems become your problems. But you want to help and prove that you can help. You come from the same community, understanding their situations and you know how to help, so that became an issue. I still got good grades. And it helps when I changed my major to social work. I used my experience for a lot of my social work assignments and visa versa. I had to learn the hard to leave your work at work. It took me a while to able to make that transition.

LD: So do you mean that transition from social worker into more the kind of administrative role?

LZ: Right. You're doing both at the same time, plus trying to make a living; I had to set priorities.

LD: Yes. And is it safe to say that has been true pretty much since then—and we'll cover the years in between more in detail. [Chuckles]

LZ: Sure, sure.

LD: But pretty much you've stayed in this area for the rest of your career, basically around farm work. And I mean, basically, you've dedicated your life to that, your professional life. Is that correct to say?

LZ: Yes. That's accurate. [Pauses] I have to look at my career a little bit in stages.

LD: Yes.

LZ: First, we were young, energetic and farmworkers. We were hungry for knowledge. Secondly, we had the tremendous opportunity of attending or going to college. It was up to us to graduate and make the most of it. And third, the opportunity of working with your community. The opportunity to attend college was paramount.

LD: Okay.

LZ: Our community and the youth were driven to learn and attend college. We had the interest and the numbers. If you look at it now, we have the same issues now we had in the 1960s. *Except* it's a different type of person.

LD: Yes. Tell me about that.

LZ: That's jumping quite a bit ahead though. Do you want to do that?

LD: [Chuckles] Well, yes, just tell me a little bit about the reflection. What do you mean by a different kind of person?

LZ: People migrated from Texas to harvest crops. A majority of us had completed high school, and they knew how to live in the United States. They've lived here, in Minnesota, from the 1940s, if not earlier. We had people who were undocumented, but not that many. Getting a green and becoming a resident was easier, as well.

LD: I see.

LZ: We had a great number of kids who had not graduated, but they had gone through the eleventh grade, twelfth grade maybe, or completed most of the schooling. We *had* that. So now you have a different situation. You have people coming into the United States with Mexican education, very well prepared, but unfortunately their education is not acknowledged here. You also have the other folks who are not well educated. Although, I see parallel to our previous history and situation, people were better prepared to function within America's environment, then. All this creates a different environment and atmosphere for families and acclimating to their new society or community.

LD: Right.

LZ: I met with a young woman. Well, obviously, a lot younger than I, she must have been thirty-five or forty. Her son was about maybe sixteen. We were in a Mankato Youth Conferences. The young woman explained how bad the school was in St. James, MN. She stated that the school is always picking on my son. The young then stated that “As soon as I become sixteen. I’m going to drop out of school.” His mother was very supportive of her son in his decision to drop out. I turned around and asked the young man, ‘why are you dropping out?’ The young man said, “The teacher doesn’t pay attention to me and they are always picking on me”. I said ‘So you’re dropping out? So you’re going to win what?’ Then the mother came back and says, “No, but they don’t like my *mijo* [son or sonny, Spanish slang term of affection].” And I said, “Look. Mom, I’m going to tell you this. You shouldn’t support your son and his decision. That’s the wrong thing to do and attitude. You should tell him, ‘Straighten up, it might be hard, but school is important.’”

The support or lack thereof was a lot different from we were used to in the past.

LD: Yes.

LZ: That has not been the only time I have heard this type of discouragement from families. I can understand that teachers and schools are not supportive or may discriminate. But, we cannot perpetuate the sentiment from our children, to drop out. We are doing a disservice to the child and well as to our community when this happens. Alternative solutions should and could have been investigated. Blaming somebody else is not a good reason to drop out high school.

LD: Okay. So let’s kind of back up just a little bit.

LZ: Okay.

LD: From when you were at Migrant Health?

LZ: Migrant Health, yes.

LD: So from there, what have been some of the other organizations that you’ve been involved with and what positions have you had? It doesn’t have to be the full, complete list. [Chuckles] But just maybe highlights.

LZ: Let me just give you a highlight. I left the Minnesota Migrant Council after I was the planner/evaluator. I was in that position for a year and a half. My primary job was to make sure a transition was happening with those programs – from an advocacy and outreach type of system to one that had to place people in jobs or employment and training approach. Totally a different approach altogether.

LD: Yes.

LZ: MMC had to change its approach from advocacy and support service to an employment and training approach. The new approach was to educate farmworker and help them locate

permanent year round jobs. This was a totally different concept to our previous approach or work.

Our staff was mostly community people with no formal education and training, whose passion was to fight for human rights. The new philosophy or approach of training farmworkers and helping them seek permanent jobs was strange and unacceptable. Extensive trainings on the new system and approach proved fruitful. Younger staff welcomed the new approach while the older staff was more resistant to change and took longer to train. Nevertheless, we were able to make the transition to the new employment and training approach. MMC was the catalyst for change and new approach and a system of training and employment. We developed key policies and procedures that provided substantial aid to farmworker students while they attended training.

On the other side, we had a board from the old school as well... which understood that we had problems and emergency issues to address. However, the transition from advocacy mode to one of employment and training under CETA was implemented. Our organization MMC had a budget of \$127,000 that grew to \$3 million in the span of about a year.

LD: Whoa.

LZ: At that time, even \$127,000 was a lot of money. But now, we had a lot more money.

LD: Yes. Well, that's a huge increase in one year.

LZ: Right. My job was to try to mobilize, expand the program, plan services, to consider the number of people we provided services to, train them and place on jobs. Our primary ally at that time was Congressman Hubert Humphrey. Our first funding increase happened because of the support of Congressman Humphrey, MMC had about \$3 million for Minnesota and then we added another \$1.5 million for North Dakota. Our total funding came to \$4 or \$5 million at that time. That was during 1973 and 1974.

LD: Pretty substantial for that time.

LZ: Right. The MMC was in good financial standing but organizations in the twin cities were struggling with the demise of Migrants, Incorporated. Migrant in Action was struggling as well. MMC debated the need to open an office in the twin cities, but old politics still prevailed and strained relationships. MMC decided to subcontract with Migrants in Action. The total amount of the contract was \$500,000 or half a million dollars to do Employment and Training and place farmworker in permanent jobs. We funded some other organizations as well. MMC main objective was to recruit, train and place three hundred (300) people per year. We accomplish this by placing them into college and into vocational training. We set up a system for recruitment and placed farmworker into one or two year vocation training programs. They would receive an hourly rate for each hour they attended school plus the first month's rent, etcetera. We were successful and achieve our goals yearly.

Through MMC, we developed and designed a system to fund farmworker training. Sometimes, we're our own worst enemies. Our biggest fight with staff or people would say, "We can't recruit. People don't want to stay in Minnesota or it's too cold". So shortly, after that, I left and took a position as a Counselor at a technical college [in Moorhead Technical College] and one of the responsibilities was to recruit minorities' students. During first year—we implement a system to recruited minority students. We recruited forty-five Mexicanos/farmworkers into the technical college and acquiring the funding from MMC for them. This does not include the ten (10) other minorities recruited.

LD: Wow.

LZ: Forty-five. Funding was acquired through MMC to cover their training costs. In MMC, we set up a financial aid or a system that would cover the students' educational needs and get paid to attend college. Their educational needs were met along with their relocation needs and stipends for living expenses plus financial aid received. There were some issues along the way, but out of those forty-five, we had ninety percent graduation rate.

LD: Wow.

LZ: We had one woman that was going into auto mechanics, a non-traditional training for a woman, at the time. We had more men than women, quite a disparity between the sexes. Our culture traditions were manifesting themselves in our recruitment efforts. Parents, particularly, dads intervened stating the girls belong at home and men have to work. Fathers would not let daughters be recruited, attend to colleges or attend training. That was the reality; we had to work in the first several years. After a year at the Moorhead Technical College, I left to take a position with MMC as the Deputy Director. MMC and its staff realized that farmworkers were interested in education and training. That recruitment could be accomplished

But we had some problems to address. Most farmworkers recruited that were married, but only the man went to school. The old Latino tradition was causing major issues with families' dynamics. The wife would normally stays at home, doesn't go out, and they do not have the family support they would if they were back in Texas. The man, keeping with his traditional methods, after school, did whatever he wanted, goes out drinking, if an argument ensued the wife was beaten up and she had no alternative or a familial support system to depend on. We had to address this issue because of the ramification to families and kids. At that time, Casa Esperanza was just starting to address Latino women issues, particularly, domestic abuse.

LD: Yes.

LZ: We approached Casa de Esperanza to either expand their services to work with this new emerging population of young women. To make a long story short, MMC created a women's program within the Minnesota Migrant Council. We met with the Casa Esperanza and worked out a partnership and support for the need. We needed women service in the rural areas to addressed domestic abuse. Our efforts, paid out, and our recruitment ratio went to a fifty-fifty ratio of men and women. Families were being kept together and counseling was being provided

on how to work out the differences. Most folks recruited were very young without the understanding of how to solve, address and talk about their issues. And it was obvious that the worst obstacle we had were the dads, letting their daughters attend college or training.

Eventually, through promoting the program and speaking with parents, we were able to address this issue as well. The issue became more manageable and proved workable. Every year since 1973, we were graduating almost three hundred people per year from technical colleges and placing the same number in permanent jobs. Our placement ration increased as our system, program and methods improved in Minnesota. North and South Dakota had there own successes and their placement ratio were 300 and 150 respectively.

LD: You were graduating them.

LZ: Right, from a college or technical college. However, federal regulations and policies allowed us to fund a student up to two years only. The emphasis of employment and training is to assist a person to become employable. At the same to minimize the training and placement costs. This system worked for two year technical college but we were able to fund only two years of a four year college education. In fact, your dad [Mario Duarte] along with a group of University students came to visit us on that about providing more scholarships and fully funding college students.

LD: Oh, really?

LZ: Way back then. Ask him about that.

LD: [Chuckles]

LZ: They came and met with Jose Valdez and I. They wanted funds for scholarships. And we said, we can't give you full scholarships. We can fund training or provide college assistance for only two years but you still have to be a farmworker. We'll try to help you out as much as possible.

Our geographic and programmatic areas increased to include Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota, fortunately along with our funds. Our funding increased from \$3 million to \$5 million in a short span of time. In South Dakota, we served both Latinos and white farmworkers, and as well American Indian farmworkers, which was a totally different culture.

The MMC, Jose Valdez and I, had established an excellent relationship with Governor Wendell Anderson. Because of that relationship with Governor Anderson, we were able to create the Migrants Affairs Office. Such relationships helped us to be postured politically from the perspective of making institutional and regulatory changes. We would get priority funding from different state departments. But we also funded strategic positions within various departments that impact programs and services to farmworkers. These were essential and important contracts.

Thereafter, MMC was soundly anchored in place. We helped established several other national organizations to address farmworker issues nationally. Meanwhile, most Midwest Farmworker Organizations had been gathering and discussing issues and problems of farmworkers as they traverse the country looking for work in the Midwest agricultural fields. These organizations created a partnership or organization called the Midwest Association of Farmworker Organizations to discuss common issues and problems in the Midwest.

Our sources of funding remained constant, which helped our organization become stable. Our main funding originally came from the Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO). Under the Johnson administration most of the War on Poverty initiatives came under fire. Nixon dismantled most programs and changed OEO into the Community Services Administration, 1974. Despite all the changes, we were able to maintain our funding with a national focus and administered from the national office. The new department implemented under Nixon called CSA [Community Services Administration, which funded community programs from 1974-1981]. However, farmworker programs were able to acquire a set aside funding under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA, 1973) within the Department of Labor. When [President Ronald] Reagan came in, he did away with Community Service Administration and shifted our funding from community action into Health and Human Service.

The restructuring of CETA into the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982 (JTPA) presented some major issues, at a national meeting with the Department of Labor. We, mostly MAFO or Midwest organizations and others walked out from the national meeting. MAFO along with others created a National Association of Farmworker Organizations. We took MAFO and changed the M for Midwest into an N for National. Basically, MAFO was the catalyst for NAFO, a National Association of Farmworker Organizations. This association became strong nationally and confronted the DOL (Department of Labor), on different issues facing farmworkers. And they confronted Nixon as well as Reagan. We advocated on behalf of farm workers and rural communities increase funding for other needs such as education, health, etc.

NAFO membership had 52 organizations representative of each state and its structure was further divided into four regional coalitions; the East, Midwest, Southwest and the West. The board of directors was composed by representation each coalition as well as at large membership.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Now you have to understand that migrant education funding is almost \$300 million. Migrant Health also has set aside farmworkers of almost \$200 million.

LD: Wow.

LZ: Funding for farm worker programs under the Department of Labor Workforce Investment Act has unfortunately remained constant at \$71 million for years. Currently, there are farmworker programs funded under these funds in each state including Puerto Rico and Guam.

LD: What, today?

LZ: Right. And then there is USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] farm worker housing. You have \$16 million for 514 program and about \$14 million in the 516 program.

LD: What, today or then?

LZ: Today. The funding streams for farmworkers today were made possible by the advocacy of farmworker organization from prior days and current efforts.

LD: I see.

LZ: There are a lot of us advocating for farmworkers nationally.

LD: Okay. And so it was a national association—that was what it was called—National Association of Migrant?

LZ: National Association of Farmworker Organizations.

LD: Farmworker Organizations. Okay.

LZ: Yes. We took the word “migrant” out.

LD: Why is that?

LZ: Because in some places the people weren’t migrants, they were actually seasonal farmworkers living in the town.

LD: So MAFO stands for?

LZ: At that time it used to be the Midwest Association of Farmworker Organizations.

LD: Okay. So you set up all these programs and you were part of the national organization. And what years are we talking about here?

LZ: [Pauses] Through strong advocacy by these organizations, we were successful in acquiring these funds. I would say from late 1960s, 1974 to 1988.

LD: Okay. And what happened in 1988 to change that?

LZ: Well, I was fired as Executive Director of the Minnesota Migrant Council.

LD: Oh.

LZ: But back to the advocacy. When Reagan was elected, he wanted to dismantle programs, MAFO met in St. Cloud. I was still the Director of MMC and as well as the Chairman of MAFO. One of the MAFO members was the Chairman of NAFO. At this meeting, we discussed the political atmosphere of the time and what the Reagan administration was proposing. Plans were drawn to conduct a national demonstration March in Washington, DC. We term this event a National Day of Mourning. The theme was representative of the death of the War on Poverty programs. We invited 25 national leaders, as a group developed the necessary plan and details to conduct a national March while enjoying a barbeque in our MMC office. The result was a National March called the National Day of Mourning. Partnerships were established with national black leadership, and the American Indians Nations.

The plan involved getting migrant farmworker, as well as others interested groups, to converge in Washington, DC as well as build national momentum. We had migrants' caravans traveling across the United States vehicles to demonstrate during the National Day of Mourning. We developed black post cards which were mailed to the White House and congress. We had over 200,000 thousand descend on DC for the demonstration.

Nevertheless, major programs were de-funded and the beginning of the death of President Johnson's War on Poverty programs continued. As retaliation, we felt that the administration went after NAFO and its funding. That was pretty much the death of NAFO. And obviously they started de-funding government programs administered by NAFO.

LD: Yes.

LZ: MAFO resurrected again. We tried to salvage NAFO as much as we could.

LD: Okay. So I just kind of want to, again, cover the highlights.

LZ: Sure, no problem.

LD: So from 1988, what happened then? And then what has been the evolution then until now? I know it's a lot of years, so again, highlights. [Chuckles]

LZ: Yes. NAFO went down, so then we tried to resurrect MAFO again, and we did. Then MAFO decided to go and meet with NCLR [National Council of La Raza]. If you go back in the history of NCLR, NCLR started out in Texas and Arizona.

LD: And that's National Council of La Raza.

LZ: It's National Council of La Raza, and they were a rural organization in the beginning. They had evolved from a rural organization to a national organization. Lupe Martinez and I met with Raúl Yzaguirre [former President and CEO of NCLR]. I still was the Chairman of MAFO and Lupe Martinez was the vice chair of MAFO and President of UMOS [United Migrant Opportunity Services, Inc.] in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We met with him in Houston, Texas, in 1987. And we challenged him to address farmworkers issues through NCLR. Particularly now,

that farmworker advocacy at the national level was absent. He agreed to assist us but he said, “We’ll put some money in but you must also bring some money yourself as well? It took us a while to gather interest among organizations again and create, within NCLR, the National Farmworker Center, an entity for farmworkers.

It was during 1988, MMC was in a great position financially. Our funding had increased to over \$10 million, even after several funding cuts. We had the respect of the state of Minnesota, as well as from national organizations.

I left MMC and but I was still involved nationally with different organizations. And we were still trying to keep MAFO operational and doing national advocacy. Throughout the years, we had participated in interregional meetings with Texas organizations and state government agencies. Lupe Martinez and I came up with the idea of conducting a national farmworker conference to discuss farmworker issues. MAFO at that time had \$26 in the bank.

LD: Wait, wait. I’m sorry. I’m confused. Who had \$10 million and who had \$26?

LZ: The organization—the Minnesota Migrant Council, had the million dollar budget.

LD: The Minnesota Migrant Council. Yes.

LZ: Right. Our budget had grown again to over \$10 million.

LD: Okay. Gotcha. So you’re working for the Migrant Council?

LD: Okay.

LZ: After I left MMC, Lupe and I discussed conducting a national conference through MAFO. The key question and concern was the funding. He asked, “How much money do we have?” I reapplied, “we’ve got \$26.”

LD: Okay.

LZ: We developed a concept paper and a draft agenda for a conference. We were able to gain the support from two important State of Texas Departments; the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Housing and Community Affairs to provide the initial funding for the conference. MAFO received a grant of \$12,000 contract from the Texas Department of Agriculture and a large sponsorship from the Department of Housing and Community Affairs. With their assistance we formed a planning committee to finalize and refine the agenda. With additional funding and support from various organizations from throughout the country, we were able to finance the conference. We had four hundred (400) persons attend the first National Farmworker Conference.

The Conference was focused on farmworkers and rural issues. That’s what prompted me to work with MAFO on farmworker and rural issues.

Remember that I spoke about the West and the Eastern Coalitions? These coalitions are now their own viable and strong organizations, also advocating for farmworkers.

LD: Now. You mean today?

LZ: Yes – today.

LD: Okay. Not then. [Chuckles]

LZ: No, not then, now. As NAFO, we structure four coalitions. These coalitions created their own regional associations. Example, the Cooperativa Campesina de California is a very powerful entity in California. They've been able to position themselves to get 5 - 10 percent of most funds coming into the state regardless of political affiliations. This funding is primarily for farmworkers.

LD: Wow.

LZ: These organizations took a while to evolve and to create what they are now reaping. A lot of negotiating and infighting to resolves the fears and their competitiveness. So that was how a lot partnership developed.

LD: Do you want to discuss about you getting fired in 1988?

LZ: Yes. Sure.

LD: What happened? Was it, was it essentially kind of a conflict, just like you're talking about, like infighting?

LZ: Yes. I mean, it all starts that way.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Without naming names, folks got to the point where they couldn't see the value of my involvement at both the state and national levels. The importance of building trust, partnership and recognition for your organization is important for growth as well as to create change. It was essential to maintain those partnerships, relationships and involvement. Our staff involvement was paramount to our agency's' growth. We invested significant time in building relationship with various administrations and Governors; [Wendell] Anderson, [Rudy] Perpich, and Al Quie. Many times, I was the only minority, black or otherwise, in important strategic government meetings.

We were quite involved. But, my involvement was important work as well, it opened up a lot of doors and it kept us funded. And our funding kept right on growing.

Some people either were jealous of that, me or whatever. They thought, “Well, why are you going to those things or places? Why is it so important that *you* be there?” But it did not seem to matter, whatever we present as the reason, *some* of the board members were not happy. As an agency, we had build trust and we were financially accountable. Our programs were performing excellent and we had hard working quality staff. Our strength as an organization allowed us, me to participate in multiple things. That allowed me the luxury to be involved.

When I first became the director, I was only twenty-nine years of age. All of a sudden, the administrative staff advised me, “Lalo, if our projections are correct, if we keep on spending the way we’re spending, we will have a deficit of \$300,000 to \$400,000.” That’s a lot of money. Together, we establish administrative controls and monitor expenditures on a daily basis. We control expenditures and established systems that assure services were still provided but were based on emergencies. With proper controls in place we minimized costs and came within budgeted levels, thus averting a potential disaster. We were in the black at the end of program year.

That helped us realize, one, that we can’t only be advocates, expound on philosophies, needs and human rights. But that we also have to be accountable with our programs and have to meet programmatic objectives and goals and be able to produce results. New system allowed us to securitize our procedures and controls to assure proper management and controls were in place that would provide accurate and sufficient information for adequate management decisions. Adequate controls and staffing allowed us to be involved in other things.

So that’s when the board started questioning my involvement, “Why are you traveling all over the place? What’s that got to do with your job?” I argued, “The evident is in our agency continued growth and we budget is over \$10 million. Because of our involvement and contacts, we are able to apply for funds and create the avenues for that. But then, again, there were different personalities involved, jealousy or whatever. Suddenly, the members were split and infighting started within the board.

And that was pretty much what happened. At that point, to quote an old phrase, ‘I saw the write on the wall’.

I continued working with MAFO coordinating the National Farmworker Conference. I would coordinate the conference on my spare time and used my vacation time for planning meetings or travel. My involvement with the Conference was based on contractual methods. I promoted and worked with a group to develop the agenda. As the Conference grew in revenues my salary was based on a percentage basis. My expenses were covered by MAFO and I would receive a fifty percent of the net profit.

LD: And this is for MAFO?

LZ: MAFO, right.

LD: Okay. So you worked in corporate America and then you went back to working for, who?

When did you kind of go back full time to working on farmworker issues?

LZ: I went back to work with farmworker on a full time basis in 1997. I started working with UMOS, out of Wisconsin. But remember, I had been coordinating the Conference already for a number of years for MAFO.

LD: And what does that stand for?

LZ: United Migrant Opportunity Services. My job was to create another Migrant Council, per se, here in the state of Minnesota.

LD: Okay.

LZ: They gave me a part time budget of maybe about \$30,000 or \$40,000. So I was working part time with them, and within a year and a half, our funding for Minnesota was up to \$6 million.

LD: Wow.

LZ: Then we opened up offices throughout the state: Moorhead, Crookston, Marshall, Mankato, and Willmar.

LD: And in that time, had the issues for the farmworkers stayed the same or had there been significant changes?

LZ: The issues for farmworkers stayed the same. Agriculture changed a little bit. And the actual constituents changed a lot. Beforehand they were, farmworker coming from Texas.

LD: Right. So that's kind of the difference that you were talking about.

LZ: Correct.

LD: Yes. And what about the challenges? I mean, the needs kind of stayed the same. Was the bureaucracy different? I mean, how had your work changed? Or I guess you had been in it all the while, even if it wasn't your full time job.

LZ: Right, right.

LD: Yes. So this was in 1997. And UMOS, you continued with them?

LZ: Yes. I worked for them until 2007. That was my last year with them.

LD: So that was ten years.

LZ: Yes, ten years.

LD: So in that time, what was the evolution of the work? From 1997 to 2007.

LZ: What we found when we started to implement the program was more openness from Minnesota employers. With the influx and resettlement in the Willmar area and other similar places we found employers were more open to employ Latinos.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Where in the past you found obstacles, now we found, folks were willing to work in addressing issues and problems collaboratively. It made it easier to implement our programs. Obviously, you still found issues or confrontations. But Latinos were now part of the food processing business, part of the community, per se. You know, part of the landscape. Communities were becoming more diverse and a more tolerant community resulted.

LD: Well, there's been a tremendous growth in the Latino community. I mean, probably from 1997 to 2000 you saw a *huge* explosion, I'm assuming. Can you tell me more about how those communities have changed because of the Latino presence? I know that some towns have kind of been resurrected.

LZ: [Pauses] Wow, that's a tough question. I see it in different way. And I'm not trying to be paternalistic or pessimistic. I think that sometimes in smaller communities, they'll look at us and see that we're part of the workforce, but not necessarily part of the decision making or community. Yes, we do impact school resources and provide an additional tax base. Obviously, Mexicanos set up businesses quickly, another asset to a community, but they are not predominant members of the community, business community or partners in the community development. Some of us are invited to discussions but we are not really look as a viable asset. We are merely a resource that is a necessity for the community. My belief would seem very pessimistic but let's look at Americans' long history.

This is not the first time where Latinos have been the majority in a city or state for that matter, and we are still under-represented in all levels of local government or social groups. Examples are Texas, New Mexico and California. Large numbers does not necessarily equate to power or acceptance. There is still discrimination in those states.

LD: I see.

LZ: Our community does have a lot of good leaders. Most are outspoken and well versed on issues. Many can verbalize the issue and present it well. But many lack the experience to write a description of the issue into a small paragraph, analysis the method to address the issue, develop a program which addresses the issue. They lack the necessary experience of supervising implementation of project and changing approaches of implementation to assure success. Not to mention the funding needed to a finance project. We don't have much experience in that. That is where community organizations that are self-governed, such as MMC and others, are very important to our community. They become a catalyst not only for change but a training ground for young leaders to gain experience and growth.

As MMC and MAFO, we had the luxury of direct involvement and learning from each other. We had to learn quickly, be trained and grow as young leaders as we proceed with making change. These types of agencies provide the training environment for many of us.

LD: Yes.

LZ: This younger generation is now experiencing what we experienced then. Our leadership is growing again with new energy, young voices and they are better educated. They sophisticated and understand our community well. This type of progression is evident not only within our immediate community, but our younger generations are now entering the corporate world. Our business community is growing exponentially both in the large business sectors as well as the small businesses. Our potential is endless. Remember what I said? I wish I could be trained in business.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Understanding business, business finance or how systems work can help dissect problems and solve them, it is from this perspective that young leadership must be taught or trained. Controlling our destiny, our environment is essential.

LD: I see.

LZ: Sentiments, such as ‘How are you going to help me?’ can be counter-productive to self realization and growth. We don’t find this type of drive in younger people today. Some people want to run when they can’t walk yet.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Our community in Minnesota and the Twin Cities has experienced a tremendous growth and influx of well educated Latinos from various countries. They provide another dimension of established growth and experience different than yours and mine. Their background and home country experience provides a difference in thinking and outlook of life and business. Which is not bad, in fact, it complement our total community and maximizes our growth as a community. Their drive and our own business community can provide the impetus which will hopefully attract the young into the corporate world.

LD: Yes.

LZ: While working with the Minnesota Migrant Council we witness a lot of success stories. I’ll give you a case in point, Juan Rivas. A former student of ours, who along with his brother and sister, was able to take advantage of our training programs and scholarships to attend college. Upon his graduation from college, he started working with the MMC as a counselor and employment & training specialist. Thereafter, he worked with McDonalds as corporate human resources manager. Through his transition as a farmworker, student, community worker than

working in the corporate office of an international company, he has gained tremendous experience and help his community as well.

Kids nowadays want what adults have, but they're not willing to work or spent the time to get there. They want it now, which is a quite different from our background and experience.

LD: I was going to ask, actually. I should have asked before. How many kids do you have?

LZ: I've got three boys.

LD: Three boys. And you're married?

LZ: I'm married, yes. My wife name is Kathleen R. Zavala. And I have five grandkids and two great-grandkids.

LD: Congratulations!

So let me kind of go back, I just wanted to make sure I've got that. What do you think—I mean, amid all of this, you know, the things you're talking about. Different people, both living in the metro area, people living in rural areas, the Latino community has grown exponentially since your first days here. What do you think are some of the major contributions that Latinos have made to the state? And it can be farmworker-specific or in general or both.

LZ: Let me say what a farmworker is, so that you understand.

LD: Yes.

LZ: A farmworker is any person who works on a farm for wages as a laborer. And it can be any ethnic group. It can be anyone from any country. Now, let's go back to farm work. When you look at farm work, where did it come from? Or is farm work done only in American. Or is it done all over the world? Farm work has been part of the world for centuries. If you read stories in the bible or read about slavery, you will find farmworkers. You will find people who were peon, workers or slaves who harvested the crops of owners. There have always been farmworkers.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Our whole economy system as well as other countries of the past was based on agriculture. If you look at the biggest revenue source in the state of Minnesota, it's agriculture industry. Every rural city has been built on agriculture. If you look at Minnesota itself, every town in the rural area was based on agriculture. Minneapolis-St. Paul was based, and grew, out of agriculture. Pillsbury, Green Giant, and General Mills are companies built and are agricultural based. Agriculture became the veins, the routes to import-export. So when you say, what has farm work done? That's what it's done. It's created an economy for a state, for a country, and for the world. As Latino, we're part of that and help maintain that economy through sweat and tears.

LD: Right.

LZ: We're part of that, of that rural or global economy of an agricultural based economy. Food commodities feed the world.

LD: Yes.

LZ: And it's farmworkers all over the world. Now, if you go back to Mexicanos coming here to Minnesota, we can go back to the 1940s and 1950s. If you look at every world war and as young farm men left for the war the demand for foreign labor demand the importation of workers, farmworkers. Latino went into the auto industry as well as built war machines because of the lack of young 'American' workers. There was a depletion of labor, and there is a labor demand. American established programs [barcero program 1042 (*Spanish manual laborer*)], specifically designed to allow Mexicano immigrants to come and assist with the harvest and work in the agricultural fields of American. This program ended in 1964.

If you look at Green Giant, Pillsbury, there are many agriculture related companies; they were built by our sweat as well. The sugar beet company, American Crystal Sugar, was also part of it. We harvested the crops, and we made agriculture work. Now, what would happen if we didn't have the influx of thirty or forty thousand farmworkers coming in, during those periods? Most people will argue most of the farmworkers are undocumented. Well, maybe they are. But what if you stopped that influx of farmworkers right now? I would venture to say that the price of most produce, the fruits and vegetables would increase tremendously. Most produce would be import from other countries at a price.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Now what will happen in about five to ten years from now when China becomes the biggest producer in vegetables and we purchase all food products from China?

LD: So, with that, what do you think needs to be done? You've worked in this field and you've been passionate about it all your life. What needs to happen so that the farmworker and the Latino farmworkers can move forward? From your own perspective.

LZ: We can go back and take credit for a lot of successes of the past. I mean, your own dad can take credit for the growth of Latino media. They were the pioneers of the times. Would those successes have happened with us or without us? Somebody would have taken the lead and similar successes would have continued, regardless of us. We were just in the right place or pawns of the times.

LD: Part of the what?

LZ: We're pawns in this movement that has happened in the 1960s. We were part of the growth, change and evolution of our community. We were part of it; we were not *the* leaders, we were not. Our community needed it and demanded it.

LD: Got it.

LZ: Let's talk about the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce "Twenty-five on the Rise". I am real impressed by the quality of candidates and their accomplishments. These are the new pioneers for us. Those are *very* smart young people. We had nothing to do with that. Or did we? In other words, we will evolve, regardless.

We must create corporate Latinos who are *conscious* of our community need.

Corporate Latinos that contribute back to our community. There is a young man in St. Cloud that attended Saint John's University. He came from the same type of family that maybe you and I did. From a poor family and a large family but he had a dilemma. He wanted to work with the community but he had also been offered a job with the government. He asked me "I want to work with the community, but the government has offered me a job as well. What do you think I should do?" My advice is to take the government position, grow within their system and pay grades. You can still volunteer to work with your community, be a mentor and/or contribute to Latino funds drives that assist youth.

We need to create an atmosphere of Latino philanthropic spirit.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Think about it. If we make sure that our kids get educated. *That's* when are contributing to our community. Don't forget that your kids or my kids are going to grow different, in different environment than ours. The reason why they're going to grow up different is because they experiencing, a different belief structure, new technology and their exposure to a confluence of cultures that I was *never* exposed to.

LD: Yes.

LZ: It is a totally different way of thinking. Not a new one. An example, if twenty community conscious Latinos became CEOs within corporate America, like the Coca Cola CEO—Roberto Goizueta and developed respective community foundations and gave back to our community. Imagine the impact. Mr. Coizueta developed such a foundation. He put his *money* where his mouth is. We need to create that spirit, that culture of philanthropy amongst ourselves.

LD: I see.

LZ: If we don't do that, then why are we asking for funding, if we can't do it ourselves?

LD: That's a very good point. What about for you? I mean that's a very profound statement about, you know, creating our own culture of philanthropy. But what about you? You know, so I guess we have a few more years to account for in your work life. Actually, let's do that. So you finished at UMOS in 2007.

LZ: Right.

LD: So from then to now, what have you been up to?

LZ: I currently work as the CEO of MAFO. We are a National Partnership of Farmworker and Rural Organizations. Our focus is building stronger rural communities. Our funding is earned income derived mostly from conducting a National Farmworker Conference. We raise approximately \$120,000 annually and we also have a contract from the United States Department of Agriculture in provide providing training to farmworkers who wish to become farmers, themselves. We have other small grants. We provide training nationally in workforce development, rural development, community development and education. We also provide training seminars federal and state agencies on issues confronting farmworkers and rural Latinos.

Also, MAFO advocates for farmworker and rural Latinos in partnership with various organizations throughout the country including the National Farmworker Alliance which is composed from all the national farmworkers groups which include the United Farm Workers (UFW) of America, Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) and others. We currently have 26 members and we promote the Fairness to Farmworker initiative.

MAFO have begun a National Campaign promoting 'building stronger rural communities' with a focus on farmworker and rural Latino communities.

Most of our community started in rural communities, they moved into the major cities because of necessity or jobs. Nationally, much attention has been placed to large Hispanic communities in major cities. While we support and want to address issues confronting our community, we focus our work those disenfranchise rural Latinos.

Rural Latinos have been part of the fabric of America since this country started. History can not deny that. We are a community of mixed ethnicity complemented with Indians ancestry.

LD: Yes.

LZ: We may be chastised because of our Spanish last names. Latinos transcend various races and nations. We accept our Spaniard heritage as well as the mixture of our blood and ethnicity. Hey, we're Latino now.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Hispanic families can trace their ancestry back thirteen to sixteen generations, prior to the *Mayflower*. Latinos have been agrarian. Many received land grants from the Spanishards becoming small farmers and ranchers.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Although farming in general is declining among white farmers. The number of Latinos farmers on the other hand—is increasing. We already had Latino farmers in the southwest now new arriving families coming from Mexico, Honduras, etc and working as farmworkers but getting into farming in their own land as well. The number of Latino farmers' grew by 14 percent in the last 7 years. And the number of Latinas in farming grew faster than for men.

LD: Wow.

LZ: That's not to say that we didn't have farms beforehand. We just didn't *know* we were farmers.

LZ: You have to be careful with the definition of a farmer. Accordingly to the USDA, you are classified a farmer if you sell \$1,000 in produce. Example, if you plant a garden and have total sale of thousand dollars from that garden, you are now a farmer.

LD: Ah.

LZ: However, Latinos do have larger farms, all over the country. In Minnesota, there are four hundred to five hundred Latino farmers.

LD: I didn't realize that.

LZ: Hispanics can be found in most Minnesota towns. Our community has experience exponential growth throughout Minnesota. Some town/cities have welcomed us. Our presence and numbers have assured that funding for schools and industries remain in the area. We also bring an entrepreneurship spirit helping local economies thrive. Driving through rural communities, you can locate Latino small businesses created within the last several years.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Our community tends to open not just restaurants, but other business as well. MAFO understands that farmworker and the rural Latino communities have evolved. We've farmworker still working in the sugar beets fields, as well as in *lecherias* [dairies] and they are the major workforce for most food processing industries, *todas* [all of them].

LD: Yes.

LZ: We have small farmers farming small plots of land throughout the country. In Stearns County, we have fourteen small Latino farmers.

LD: Oh, so the work has really evolved.

LZ: Yes. The industries and work performed by farmworker and rural Latinos has changed and actually, we are replacing the local workers as they themselves retire. We have thus really evolved into a viable workforce that maintains the current industry in local communities, if not the country. What will happen without this workforce (or Latinos presence)?

MAFO realized this changed... or evolution that was happening, we changed our previous name of the Midwest Association of Farmworker Organizations to simply MAFO, Inc. We took MAFO national or made it national partnership. Now we just known as MAFO, we're not the Midwest, anymore, but a national organization.

LD: Oh! What does it stand for anything then?

LZ: Our name is not an acronym. It is simply, MAFO, Inc. However, we have taken the following tag line to provide a better understanding of our focus. We are National Partnership of Farmworker and Rural Organizations.

LD: Ah, okay.

LZ: Our focus or mission did not change but in fact incorporated the Latino rural communities into it. There are very few Latino rural organizations providing services to rural Latinos. That is why we are developing and implementing a national campaign to focus on 'building stronger rural communities. Latinos have become a viable and strong asset to rural America. We must champion that.

LD: Right.

LZ: Okay. When farmworkers first came to Minnesota settled out, mostly in rural areas. But most Latinos don't know they're farmworkers until you come in touch with a program that says, "You're a farmworker." But your brother's not a farmworker. Farmworkers, stay in rural communities, some of them working in the fields during the summer time while others started working with local food processing industries. Others started their own businesses making rural cities and towns stronger. With this change, MAFO vision and mission changed to addressed Latino with the concept of building a stronger rural America – stronger rural communities. How do we capitalize on Latinos entrepreneurship, whatever they may be, interested in and selling? Be it a restaurant or whatever.

LD: That's fascinating. That really is interesting how the work that you started with when you were not even out of college. While you were in college. It's the change is pretty remarkable from just being people who pick the beets, say, to people who grow the beets.

LZ: Right.

LD: And yes, that's pretty remarkable, in your lifetime, to begin to see that change. Do you think that's just going to keep growing?

LZ: Oh, yes! It will evolve. I mean, with or without us, it will evolve.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Okay. Take Willmar, for instance, which is not necessarily the oldest Latino community in Minnesota, Latinos settled maybe fifteen – twenty years ago. Kids who were nine, or ten years old when their parents settled there, are now grown adults. Some Latinos and their kids have inter-married with other races and now have kids are no longer “just Mexicanos.” They don't look at themselves as Mexicanos. They've evolved into something different, if you may. Some are educated, some are not educated. Through marriage their last name has changed, as well. We have evolved. Recently, we are getting new families of Mexicanos, who have recently has arrived from Mexico, and they confronting the same issues did twenty - thirty years ago.

LD: Yes.

LD: So I wanted to wrap up the end of your career evolution and what you've been doing. Because one of my main questions here as we're beginning to wrap up is what are some of your greatest satisfactions? Things that you're proud of that you've worked on.

LZ: I am proud to have worked with the community. Our greatest accomplishment was building a strong organization that train a large number of Latino farmworkers and placed them in permanent positions.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Secondly, I had the luxury to have worked with such a dedicated and professional staff. Some are still working in positions helping others. Most of our staff came to work with MMC directly after graduating from college. We, all of us essentially grew and gained tremendous knowledge and experience through our involvement with MMC and our work.

Also, I have met quite a few people that comment, “I went through the Minnesota Migrant Council program and I got my initial training through your programs.” Now there is a satisfying feeling, when people tell you that.

LD: And what are your hopes for the future? Both for yourself and for MAFO or the communities that you work with.

LZ: [Pauses] You are always thinking of what you can do better... we could have done it better or different. This is a two-edged sword.

LD: Oh, yes. Yes.

LZ: When we started off, in hindsight, maybe we went the wrong direction in the 1960s.

LD: How so?

LZ: Because we wanted to change and improve community. We all wanted to educate ourselves, go back to our community and make changes. You look back to see if you indeed make structural changes that have been imbedded into our community infrastructure. As an example, there is the West Side better, is it than it was twenty or thirty years ago? We can debate that. You can say, yes or no. What are/were the major changes?

Another example maybe MMC, as an organizations we trained a lot of young people then. But did we make structure changes in fabric of our community? Or did we just help some folks, who hopefully did well. But how about the infrastructure of our community, we did not changed that.

And remember when I said that maybe we should look to business or gone into building businesses?

LD: Yes.

LZ: Business really runs almost all of our lives.

LD: Sure.

LZ: Maybe we should have concentrated on training or preparing kids for the business world instead of trying to change the world and how people think. Instead of working for someone, work for ourselves and controlling our environment.

LD: Sure. Yes.

LZ: Now there's nothing's *wrong* with what we in the past or pushing community business infrastructure, because what we really want to do is to make a build stronger community and make a better living for ourselves and community.

LD: Yes.

LZ: We need more Latino business people. We *need* those folks. And so the question comes back, did we create the atmosphere of change or change. We did train people, and hoping they have lived better with that education.

LD: I see. More like a homegrown kind of business development?

LZ: Community development. Change our own infrastructure. That's where the money is. That's where decisions are made. But we only had one.

LD: So that's one of your hopes?

LZ: Yes, as MAFO, we are campaigning to create this type of change.

LD: What about you? What are your hopes for the future? I wonder if you get the same question that my dad got for many years: when are you going to retire? Man, aren't you tired? [Chuckles]

LZ: My wife and I have discussed retirement, but even if we retire, we will be involved with the community somehow or another. Volunteering or through membership of some service organizations.

LD: That's great!

LZ: I don't think that I'll ever retire. But, I do want to travel. I do want to see the world. We've been traveling, but not enough.

LD: Is there anything else that you kind of want to comment on, officially, for the record? [Chuckles] That you want people to know about the work and what you've seen of farmworker communities, Latino communities, anything?

LZ: Wow. [Pauses] Sometimes as an individual or organization we think that we are the answer, or we have the answer, for everything. Our biggest strength is when we work together.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Because we have nothing to lose and more to gain.

LD: Yes. So work together.

And I guess maybe this will be my last one. But as you look at that—and clearly right now there's a lot of kind of rhetoric around immigration, etcetera. What do you see as the future for farmworkers in the next few years? I mean politically. Immigration is a very hot topic. But beyond just immigration, what do you hope to see in the next few years?

LZ: [Pauses] That's a very loaded question, for immigration will always be there.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Immigration was/is not the issue. When [George W.] Bush was president; he and Fox had already worked an agreement. .

LD: You mean Mexican President Vicente Fox?

LZ: Yes, President Vicente Fox. His visit to Minnesota preceded his planned visit to Washington, DC and the main topic was going to be immigration, business and trade.

Current immigration rhetoric was started by Pat Buchanan way back. He has always maintained that Mexican-Americans or Latino were speaking about the *Reconquista* of the Southwest.

LD: The re-conquest.

LZ: The re-conquest. So this rhetoric is not new. It's old.

LD: Yes.

LZ: 9/11 and current rhetoric from conservatives has provided the momentum against immigration. Support from either party has since been minimized. The administration has not fully supported it nor has congress for that matter.

On the other hand, farm work itself might be a contributing factor to support the need for form of comprehensive immigration. Currently, strong agricultural lobby are introducing legislations that guarantee workers to work and harvest American crops. This type of legislation could be the impetus or adequate argument for an orderly immigration bill by both parties. Agriculture and farmwork could be key and the basis for an argument of immigration. Agriculture has the biggest economy impact in the country and the population.

LD: I'm sorry, what is?

LZ: The immigration of farmworkers to harvest American farm goods.

LD: Oh, I see.

LZ: And that's called the AgsJob Bill. The agriculture industry is strongly pushing for legislation that benefits them or even restructuring current H2A, H2B and other immigration laws and regulation to benefit them.

LD: Right.

LZ: Where American production and companies are being hampered by a slow economy as well as people are being laid off, farm labor needs remain steady. Right now it's more racism than anything else.

LD: You mean? I'm sorry, say that again.

LZ: The immigration issue has become more of a race issue now.

LD: Yes.

LZ: Yes. People don't want to say that, but it is.

LD: Do you think it's as bad as or worse than it was before?

LZ: I'm not really sure if it ever changed, to be honest with you. It seems the American thing to do 'Blame some else for the economy problems or any other problem'. Immigrants have become the scapegoat for of American issues.

Some people maybe more tolerance, if you want to call it that. But that does not seem to be enough; particularly when national rhetoric has changed the mood of their country and the erosion of past of civil rights legislation.

LD: Yes.

LZ: I've spent most of my life here, and I still get the question, "Where are you from?" And I say I'm from Sartell. "No, no, no. Where are you from?" I ask, "What do you mean?" "What country are you from?" I finally add, "I'm from the Republic of Texas". Then people feel insulted. After thirty years, I still get that question asked.

LD: Yes. Well, that's a lot. [Chuckles]

LZ: Yes.

LD: Anything else at all that you want to add?

LZ: No, I hope that this helps in a way.

LD: Well, it seems like you've lived a lot of the history of Latino farmworkers here in Minnesota, and the development and growth of that. So it's really fascinating to hear that story.

LZ: The opportunity was there for me to work with my community.

LD: Yes.

LD: And you helped a lot of people.

LZ: Yes. *That* was the key. Unfortunately, that organization doesn't exist anymore - the Minnesota Migrant Council.

LD: But you continue the work through MAFO.

LZ: Right.

LD: Well, thank you so much.

LZ: Thank you for coming over.

LD: Again, I know that you're busy and this is a lot of time out of your schedule. So thank you once again on behalf the Minnesota Historical Society, for being part of the Latino Oral History Project.

Lideres Latinos Oral History Project
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