

Sandra L. Vargas
Narrator

Lorena Duarte
Interviewer

March 14, 2011
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sandra Vargas - **SV**
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

LD: Today in Monday, March 14, 2011. My name is Lorena Duarte and I'll be conducting the interview for the Minnesota Historical Society's Latino Oral History Project. Today, we're here with Sandy Vargas at the Minneapolis Foundation in downtown Minneapolis.

First of all, I just want to say thank you. I know you are a very busy woman, so we really appreciate you taking the time.

SV: You're welcome.

LD: Thank you. If we could start off with your name and how to spell it...

SV: My actual given name is Sandra. My middle initial is L. My last name is Vargas.

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

SV: I was born on June 18, 1946. My occupation is president and CEO [chief executive officer] of the Minneapolis Foundation.

LD: Thank you.

Could we start off with where you were born and a little bit about you family, your parents and siblings?

SV: My family originally was from Mexico, including my grandparents on both sides. My maternal grandparents lived in South Texas, but came up through the migrant stream in the 1920s. So my family has been here for a very long time. As a matter of fact, my mom and dad moved to L.A. and I was born in Los Angeles, but didn't stay there very long. I was three months old when they brought me back. I come from a very large family. I probably have in the neighborhood of 300 to 350 relatives in this area, mostly on the Minneapolis side, because my grandparents and my parents lived on the Minneapolis side, which is a bit unusual. Many folks went to Saint Paul, and I think that my actual maternal grandparents lived in Saint Paul for a while, but came back to

Minneapolis. My paternal grandparents lived in South Texas, so I have many relatives down there, too.

LD: Your parents' names?

SV: My mother's name was Julia and her last name was [sounds like Suh-vye-ohs] Vargas. My dad's name Cruz [sounds like Toh-vee-us] Vargas.

LD: Siblings?

SV: I'm the oldest of eight children. Actually, I have a half brother, David, who is a little bit older than I am, but I am the oldest of the direct siblings. The sister next to me is Estella and her last name is now Gavin, but it was Vargas. Then, after that is Don J. Vargas, who is still lives in this area. My brother Ronald Vargas is Sacramento, California. Do you want information about them?

LD: No, no, just kind of generally.

SV: Then I have a sister Stephanie Vargas, who lives in South Texas close to my mother in McAllen. She's married and has three children. My younger sister, Margo Vargas, is now [sounds like Uh-yell-oh] and she's also got three children and lives in South Texas. My youngest brother, Mike, is here with two children and his wife in the Minneapolis area.

LD: You said something that's very interesting and very true. Most people, when they think of the old timer Mexican immigrants, think of Saint Paul's West Side. Tell me what it was like for you growing up in Minneapolis. Were there a lot of Latinos?

SV: When people ask me about Latinos or neighborhood, the only thing I can think about is the family, so that was my neighborhood. I've often expressed it that way. Because we had a very large set of relatives, I always felt like I was surrounded by Latinos who were related to me.

We have a very close-knit family even now. I have to say that my parents had a vision for education, so I went to Catholic school, and there I don't remember - especially in the younger years, but also in the older ones - very many Latinos at all. Oftentimes I was the only Latina that I remember being in the class. There could have been others, but it just didn't seem that way. Our relatives didn't live very far apart, but we wouldn't have live with lots of houses of relatives next to each other.

My parents lived in Minneapolis up until the time that I was about four or five, and then they moved to the suburbs. So at that time, we had neighbors that weren't Latino. I went to Saint Raphael's Catholic's School [in Crystal, Minnesota]. First, I went to Saint Joseph's Catholic School, in New Hope. I do remember that we would go a fair amount of distance every morning from the suburbs to Saint Joseph, and then finally I went to Saint Raphael's, which was just a few blocks away from our house.

LD: Tell me what kind of a kid were you? Did you like school? Did you like sports?

SV: I was the kid that my grandparents—I say this with all humility—and my parents put their aspirations into, just because they knew life could be better. I have to say that even though my grandparents came up through the migrant stream, they only stayed there for a year. Then they settled in Minneapolis in the 1925 era, and they always had aspirations for a better life for their family, which I think most people do. It's interesting, because they worked really, really hard at very low-paying jobs in order to buy houses and to move to those neighborhoods that they felt would be better for raising a family and could also be affordable. In the case of my grandparents, it was Brooklyn Park. In our case, it was living in Crystal. Eventually, it was moving to New Hope into a bigger house.

The first point of aspiration was a decent education for their children. So my parents sent the three of us, and then my fourth brother, to Catholic school. I went to Catholic school not only through elementary school, but also went to Saint Margaret's Academy in Minneapolis. My sister did, too. My sister Estella and my brother Don went to Benilde, which was also a Catholic school. That was a huge economic burden for them to take care of, but apparently they thought it was probably one of the highest priorities they could have.

LD: What was it like growing up? Again, did you like sports? Did you like school?

SV: I liked school a lot. I have to say that I was a very good student. I was mostly an A student. I always did well academically. I didn't do sports. I'm of the age where that just wasn't part of the program at that time. But I did love to sing and did a lot of that. I was in choir. I played the piano and loved the arts part of it. That's something that was really a part of my life. I also have to say that I was a good student when I went to high school. I probably graduated, I don't know, eighth in my class from the top. In my senior year, I didn't pay quite as much attention to it as I had prior to that. I always thought that academics were an important part of my development. I remember being a Girl Scout. I was part of that kind of group.

So, in many ways, we had kind of a traditional middle class life, except for having this huge family that would get together on a regular basis. I remember having holidays where our house was pretty large. I was also the second mother in my family, so I was the paternal child. I was often in charge. My mother worked as a nurse's aide at first, and then when she was forty-five and had my brother Mike, her last child, she went back to school and got her LPN [licensed practical nurse] license. My dad was a sheet metal worker, but had been in the war and was pretty significantly disabled. He had been shot five times, and had spent a year in the hospital, so he had some disabilities. Besides that, they both were pretty active.

LD: Yes.

SV: I was the chief house cleaner and the chief caretaker of the children. That was just the role that I played. It's not that I didn't have friends. I had a lot of friends, but I also had a lot of responsibility at home. As a matter of fact, I don't remember a time when I haven't had a lot of responsibility. [Chuckles] It's kind of always been with me.

When I graduated high school, I went to Mexico with a couple of my dad's cousins and just spent a year there living with some of my family members in Mexico City and taking some classes at the University.

Then when I came back, I thought I would go right back to school and I didn't do that. I went and found a job. Eventually, I had cousins that opened some retail stores downtown, so I worked for them as a manager. I have to say that during this time, just trying to remember my history here. Prior to getting married, and I did get married at about the age of twenty-three, I was still living with my mom and dad and was working.

I remember this so well. My mom and dad decided to take a trip to Texas to see his family and then to Mexico and they'd be gone for about, oh, I don't know, three or four weeks, maybe five. They'd leave me with the kids. My grandmother would come in during the day and I would be working during the day. They were like my kids. I was going with somebody then pretty steady, so he came to pick me up and he saw all these kids. They were all like sitting on the stairs laughing.

LD: [chuckles]

SV: It was just part of my life, and it's probably why I don't have any children, because I had children when I was very, very young, in terms of having the responsibility for them. I think that it was just an unknown kind of agreement with my parents that right after them, I was the caretaker. That's followed through my entire life.

Then, I did get married at the age of twenty-three. I stayed married for about seven years. I have to say it was to somebody that didn't have the same cultural background as I did. I have to say that it probably wasn't the best decision that I've ever made, but it was what it was. We didn't have any children. I became single after seven years, again, living in the suburbs, working at retail jobs.

Then, I have to say, I got recruited by another Latino in the community that had a job at the State Department of Economic Development. This particular department was getting some heat because there were no Latinos in what the state called a Set-Aside Program, which was to take small businesses and make sure that they're getting part of the procurement or part of the goods and services that the state purchases. He came to me because I had a business background. I didn't have a degree yet. He came to me and said, "Would you be interested in this job?" I really was interested in the job, and so, after about six months of going back and forth, they hired me for the job.

What I did at that point was to work with a group of Latino businesses during that next couple of years to set up the Hispanic Chamber of Business.

LD: When was this, roughly - what year?

SV: I want to say it was in 1987. I stayed there for about two and a half years, maybe three, and all of a sudden, the state was going through a downsizing. I had just applied for another job at the City of Minneapolis, and I got the job at the city right as they were going to lay me off at the Department of Economic Development. I told them that I didn't want to be laid off. I don't know what I was thinking. I just didn't want to be laid off. So I said, "I have another job." So I got hired by the City of Minneapolis.

I got hired to come in and work with building contractors. They were building a number of buildings like the Multifoods Building – many of the big buildings in downtown Minneapolis. I worked with them to utilize women and minority businesses. I stayed there for about three years before I got hired by the Minnesota Department of Transportation [DOT].

LD: And when was that?

SV: That was in 1991. That's when I worked with highway contractors. Working with contractors and working with women and minority businesses was a challenge, because you were trying to put two groups together that didn't always really want to work together. I mean the minority and women contractors wanted business, but the building contractors and highway contractors did not want to do business with them. They wanted to do business with the people they knew. So it was really a pretty critical and delicate balancing act of trying to negotiate things, and also letting them know that I wouldn't ask them to do anything that was not going to be legal. We were also trying to help them with any kind of tactical assistance so that they could perform the work. If they had trouble performing, I'd be the first one to talk to them.

It was a really interesting kind of process. My interpersonal skills were such that I was able to work it out with both sides of that equation. Especially when you're talking about highway contractors, if they're serious entrepreneurs, they have everything coming against them whether it is dollars, budgets, the whole bit. I really got to respect the contractors for what they were able to produce. We got along pretty well. At that time, I also had the Federal Government on my side. They were pretty strong about making sure that contracts had significant portions going to women and minority businesses. I did that probably for about—what was it—six or seven years while I was at DOT.

Then I decided to get serious about going back to school. They allowed me to go back to the College of Saint Catherine in Saint Paul, and actually picked up most of the bill. I went to weekend college. So I went back to school for about four and a half years and got my undergraduate degree in business administration, and also a minor in economics and a minor in women's studies.

I was also, during that time, able to apply to be director of administrative services, which, basically, was combining two large transportation districts. So I got a significant

promotion to be director of administrative services for the metro district at DOT. When I left the job working with women and minority business, I went into a position as director of administrative services where you're dealing with internal things like the HR [human resources] rules, all of the finance, and that kind of thing. There were two districts actually, District 5 on the west side and District 9 on the east side, and we combined 1500 employees in a large scale building over in Roseville. We were constantly working with DOT to try and figure out what would be the best scenario for both the employees and management to move the organization forward. I was there for another six years, maybe even close to seven, in that position where I really honed my administrative skills and my political skills. I traveled a lot of times with fifteen engineers around the state, because we were a statewide department.

Of course, I was usually the first woman, and the first Latina, so I was always a pioneer in many of the jobs that I held. But I did really well. I'd work harder than everybody else. I was really accepted by this group of people in the Department of Transportation, and I was highly regarded and highly respected. That came back to me through feedback on my work.

At some point in my career there, I decided that I knew that they would not see a non-engineer as the top of the organization, as the commissioner. They would later get people like Carol Molnau and that kind of thing, but that's beside the point.

I had been looking at a Bush Fellowship, but because I didn't have my undergraduate degree, that wasn't going to be possible. I finally went after a Bush Fellowship in 1994. Basically, I got the Bush Fellowship to go to the [John F.] Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. I did a mid-career degree on public policy, which I really loved. It was a wonderful experience. It was a wonderful growth experience and academic experience. I took a couple of classes at the Business School, because I really do like business. The whole question of economics in business is really important to me.

There are a couple of pieces that I didn't mention to you that I'm going to go back and talk a little bit about. One was that, when I worked at the Department of Transportation in the women and minority business enterprise area, I got nominated for a fellowship with the Development Training Institute... I was nominated by somebody here at the Minneapolis Foundation.

I went to this fellowship where they were taking people who had done a fair amount of economic and community development in their communities. They'd bring them out for about four weeks over a year in order to give them a set of skills, whether it was project management or thinking about finances for a project, that kind of thing. There was a whole cohort of about thirty people that I went through this class with. I still talk to some of those folks today. I know them pretty well from that time.

Another fellowship that I had—this was later on—in DOT was the National Hispana Leadership Institute [Arlington, Virginia], which I decided to apply for. I did get selected, and again was one of twenty-eight women that went through leadership training. The

Center for Creative Leadership was a really important part of that training where they did a lot of psychological tests. You ended up with a psychologist that you spent four hours with at the end. They put you through tests, and there were even Army generals that you were going through this cohort with.

It was really interesting and eye opening. Then, they'd give you feedback about what your strengths were, what your weaknesses were, what you needed to shore up. That was very helpful, too.

I think during this whole time one important thing is that I was very close to my grandmother. She told me one time, "You have got to really take care of yourself, because your family depends on it. It depends on you being able to make decisions for the family. What she didn't say, but what she also imbued me with, was to take care of yourself, take care of your family, and take care of your community. That was the message from my grandmother that I'll never forget. I missed her so much. She died in 1991 at the age of ninety-one. She was really very much a part of my life.

LD: What was her name?

SV: Her name was Constancia [sounds like Suh-vye-ohs]—actually, Gomez [sounds like Suh-vye-ohs]. You probably know that Jesse [Bethke Gomez] and I are relatives.

LD: Yes, and also Val Vargas.

SV: Yes, Val Vargas. So we have lots of relatives all over. Irene Gomez Bethke obviously is.

LD: Right.

You went to the Kennedy School and what did you do when you came back?

SV: I came back to the DOT, because they said, "Well, we have this promotion that we want you to apply for." I didn't get it, which really made me quite mad. You always think at the time that something is happening that it's the worst thing in the world, and I'm so glad now that I didn't get it.

At that point, I made a decision that I needed to move out of the Department of Transportation. When I was at the Hispana Leadership Institute, they made you write down exactly what do you want to be doing in five years. I wrote down that I wanted to be chair of the Metropolitan Council. Now, God only knows why I wanted to do that, but that's what I wrote down.

When I came back I decided I was going to leave, so I sat with some Bush fellows that were just going into the Kennedy School. One was from Hennepin County, and he said, "The County is going to create a deputy county administrative position." I said, "Really?"

What I actually did is to say, “Okay,” to myself. “Who do I know that knows the right people?” Jeff Spartz was the county administrator. I didn’t know him directly, but I knew Kathy O’Brien, who was the city coordinator with the City of Minneapolis. So I had dinner with her, and I said, “You know I’m really interested in a new position that I think Hennepin will have.” She said, “I’ll take your résumé in to Jeff.” So she took it. She let me know that she had given it to him, and she said, “He’s going to call you.” Well, he never did. So I picked up the phone and called him after he got put into the job permanently – as permanently as those jobs ever are. I went in and visited with him and said, “I understand that you’re going to have this job.” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Do I have to apply? Will you send me the information?” He said, “I’ll send it to you.” He sent me the information. They had a whole cohort of people that applied, and it took them a very long time. After the first interview with two white males, one a psychologist and another, an HR guy, I thought, why are they doing that? They were always asking about financial stuff. I had a financial background, but it wasn’t the strongest part that I could bring to the job. I thought, oh, I didn’t get that job. Anyway, weeks later, they called back and said, “We’d like a second interview with you. By then it was myself and another person.

Finally, I got offered the job. I have to say that I was really, really excited about it. Hennepin County is the largest governmental county in the state and had a huge budget. I think it was like a billion and a half when I went in, with 10,000 to 12,000 employees. It was almost two billion when I left. I got hired for the job.

LD: When was this?

SV: This was at the end of 1997. I started in November, I think. I worked with Jeff and with different departments, trying to organize things in a totally different way.

Then, just under a year and a half later, Jeff got headhunted to go to Hennepin County Medical Center, which paid more money. I was the deputy. For some reason, I didn’t automatically think I would go into his job, which was probably a good way of thinking. Finally, there was an African American lawyer, who is a very good colleague of mine, who said, “Sandy, do you want that job or not?” I had to say, “Yes, I think I do.” He said, “Well, you better start acting like you do. You better start lobbying for yourself.” It was the first time that I really had to advocate on my own behalf. I started to talk to the commissioners. Anyway, the upshot was that I did get the job. Frankly, the chair of the board didn’t like me. His first in command didn’t like women very much, and so it was a little bit of a struggle at first. I had to really watch out for her. As a matter of fact, my boss told me that the minute I got hired into the county, “Watch out for XYZ. She doesn’t like women very much.” That was kind of the environment where you were always very careful about how you did things.

Well, after six months of me being in the acting position, the commissioners came together and the chair tried to start something negative. The others just said, “Oh, no. She’s doing a great job.” So he got to the head of the parade and they hired me on a permanent basis. But permanent doesn’t mean permanent. In a political environment, four votes and you’re out in a group of seven.

LD: Right.

SV: I really thought about the county in terms of the county's mission. It's really to work with people who are poor. It doesn't do it very well in the way that the feds and the local governments are set up, because it creates a power dynamic between all of the resources that the government has and what one individual can do when they're under pressure from that county.

The first thing we did was to look at thirty-some departments and group them into a criminal justice system, into a human services system, and into medical systems. We really tried to organize our thinking around the work that we do? The county is so big that it has everybody behind the Police Department, which is part of the City of Minneapolis. It had the sheriff, who would pick people up and hold them until they were adjudicated. It had the public defender. It had the prosecutors. It had the judges at that time - now they're part of the state. It has this huge system. A lot of times, as we thought about people who were deep in poverty, those families would utilize *huge* amounts of public services all across the system. Sometimes it was human services, or medical systems, or criminal justice - it was just really an issue where we had lots of different independent and non-relating silos. So we had to group these departments to work together and to start thinking about integrating services for individuals and families. That was a big piece of work that we cut out for ourselves.

I have to say that, especially as I was there longer and longer—I was there almost nine years—I really tried to push people towards the prevention and early intervention strategy that families needed. If you think about something like child protection, ninety percent of the kids that were taken away would go back to their birth families. In the meantime, when I first got there, Hennepin County was spending \$70 million a year on taking kids out of their homes. Obviously, there was a reason for doing that. But they put all of the emphasis on the back end. These were *very* poor people - mostly moms that were earning \$8,000 to \$12,000 a year. They need a lot of help and resources up at the front end, and I think they're finally doing that. I've been long gone, but they're finally doing that because they can no longer afford the back end work, with lawyer after lawyer, judge after judge, working with these families. I think in terms of human services, in terms of medical systems, in terms of the Criminal Justice Department, I *totally* disagreed with how the sheriff was doing his job. As a matter of fact, the public defender, Lennie [Leonardo] Castro and I were oftentimes in conversations with the sheriff. He'd say, "We're not profiling." It's like, oh, come on. Please, we had *interesting* conversations about the question of race and ethnicity and who got picked up, who was in jail.

Interestingly, I haven't given you a ton of information about what I've done with the Latino community.

LD: We'll go back to that.

SV: The Latino community isn't in Hennepin County very much. There might be many more Latinos in jail now, but in terms of services that are available to the Latino community, we just haven't partaken, and it is probably a good thing that we don't get used to public services. Obviously, there's probably some, but it's not at the level where it's really entrenched as it is with the African American community or the Native American community. Trying to keep that independence from public systems I think is a good thing.

On the other hand, I have to say that we worked hard and long with HCMC, because they are a main provider of services to the Latino community. When I was in the position, we made sure that Spanish-speaking interpreters were there, but also, hopefully, that Spanish-speaking staff was hired on permanently. Interestingly, when I got there at Hennepin, there was a real concern about the fact that we had many immigrants coming in. English wasn't spoken. So we set up a whole department of people that could interface between the client and the actual service providers, so, at least, they had some decent interpretation going on there.

When I was at the city, I developed the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce with others, and I stayed president of that for a long period of time. After I left that, I started working with Hispanic women. It is no longer around, but we had the Hispanic Women's Development Corporation, which was just the world's best idea. It was all about jobs. It was all about entrepreneurship, but it was an idea that came before its time. It was too far on the edge to see. Now, it would be perfect. We really had an aspiration to get Latinas, women, into small businesses where they could buy in with their sweat equity. That's when I was really in touch with the Development Training Institute and had developed some ideas. I was chair of that organization for five years. We really did do a lot of great work. I worked with Lu [Luisa] Bejarano and Patti [Patricia] Totozintle. I don't know if those names have come up, but they are really great women. If nothing else, we created a whole stream of Latina leadership out of that kind of experience.

At the same time, I have to say, I was Latina representative—although, they wouldn't call it that—on the Minneapolis Foundation Board for fourteen years. I also chaired the Minority Issues Advisory Council at the Met Council. I think that was probably for about three or four years. I had a huge amount of activity going on. I had my day job, and then I'd have a lot of weekend and night things. I was also part of the Women's Fund, which was part of the Minneapolis Foundation, but it kind of rolled off on its own. It was a start up, and it has been wonderful to watch that organization grow. Then, in the recent past, I was on the Guthrie Theater Board. I was also on the Northwest Area Foundation Board, and I am now on the Saint Kate's Board. [College of St. Catherine] I've just been asked to be on the Blake School Board.

It's just a matter of trying to figure out how do we open the door for others to come through? I will say that in the work here at the Foundation, one of the first items we put on the table was immigration. We're in the process of rolling out an immigration strategy and working with the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. Those businesses, especially in Greater Minnesota, need and want those Latino workers that are not documented. So we

are trying to figure out a way to think through and to communicate the economic benefit that immigrants and Latinos bring to this economy.

LD: Let me just step back a little bit.

SV: Sure.

LD: What was the final step to come here, to the Minneapolis Foundation?

SV: It's an interesting story. [Chuckles] I was at the county for almost nine years, and I was doing okay; although, you're in a place like that you're doing okay for the next ten minutes. I thought, well, I'm old enough. I could probably retire from here.

In the fall of 2006, I saw that [Minneapolis Foundation President] Emmett Carson was leaving and I thought to myself...

LD: You weren't then on the board, so you were...

SV: I'd been on the board a long time ago. I said to myself, "That is a job that I want, but I won't go there unless they ask me to apply." So I kind of kept it in the back of my mind.

Then, at the same time, I started to get some letters from a headhunter in L.A. The county administrator for L.A. County was retiring and they were starting to recruit for that position. They wrote me a letter and called me on the phone. My assistant said, "There is this guy on the phone who wants to talk to you." I said, "You know, just tell him I'm not interested." So she told him. Finally, he called back again. He said, "You know, I really want to talk to you about this job." I said, "You know, I'm of the age where I'm not going to restart my life." He said, "I really want you to take a look at this job." He ended up showing up at my office on a Monday morning. He came from L.A., flying all night on the red eye, and he said, "I'm not going to leave here without your résumé." I said, "I'll give you my résumé, but I'm not a candidate."

Anyway, he talked me into going to L.A. I had done it once before during the time I was at Hennepin County. I had gone on an interview, and of course you think everything is cool and quiet. My bosses knew that I had been on an interview. I had told my one boss that they were talking to me, but I didn't tell him I was going to go for the interview. So they were kind of mad. Fine! This time, I said, "Okay, I'm going to go into L.A., just so you know. I'm not really interested." I went to L.A. and I spent a day with the five supervisors. This is a place with \$21 billion in public dollars, and they have 90,000 homeless people. They are losing the accreditation for their hospitals. There is no strategy that I can see, but I was intrigued with it. I went back home and said, "Well, I don't know."

At that point, the headhunter from the Minneapolis Foundation called me and said, "We want you to put your name in the hat here." I did. I said, "I'm not going to deal with L.A."

I had a boss that said, “Don’t let that go.” It was really, really important for me to hear that.

What happened was that these started to move at the same time, and I’d have an interview here and an interview there. Finally - I think it was in early January when I interviewed with L.A. County and on January 9th I interviewed with the Minneapolis Foundation. Later that day, I got an offer from L.A. County to go in as the county administrator—actually, it was like the 10th of January. The next day, the Foundation called me and made me an offer. It was a pretty amazing scenario.

LD: How do you make that decision?

SV: Well, it was easy for me, mainly because this is my community. Had I not gotten this job, yes, I probably would have gone there for a few years. L.A. is tough, though. I don’t know a lot of people that feel it’s a cozy home place. On the other hand, the challenges would have been amazing. I would have been thrilled to have worked with them. I still get, from that headhunter and the other headhunter who had taken me out the time before, notifications from them on jobs that are coming up in different parts of the country, mostly in California. They’re always trying to take us away from bad weather—which is getting more tempting everyday!

LD: [chuckles]

SV: I just decided that this was my dream job and that’s the one that I wanted.

LD: When did you start here at the Foundation?

SV: I started here in April of 2007.

LD: You said that one of the first things you wanted to tackle was immigration.

SV: Immigration. The first thing I tackled was to look inside the organization and say, “We need some changes here. We need to understand costs. We need to have a structure that’s sustainable.” We went through that kind of analysis. Then we started to do a strategic plan. But I had immigration on the table from almost the first board meeting just because I knew it was an important issue for us. We also put education on the table, and building social capital.

We did a strategic plan that has three parts to it. I’ll give you a summary of it if I can find it. It has an emphasis on building rewarding relationships. In community foundations, you have to raise money, to find new donors. They opened up a donor advice fund. Minneapolis is one of the larger community foundations. We have about \$600 million in assets here. Really making sure that we are tuned into donors and making sure that we’re serving them the best way possible...

The other question we asked ourselves is what about those businesses in communities of color that are making some money? We've got a very close relationship and a fund here with the Muslim community. We're talking to the Latino community, especially the Latino restaurant community, about opening funds, because we don't want to see the Latinos as just consumers. We want to see them as producers.

LD: Right.

SV: That's been a part of our strategy. Especially with people from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, their idea of philanthropy is totally different than ours. They give to churches. They give directly to organizations, to people. We're saying, "Come here. You get a tax break. You get all of these things. We'll really facilitate this process for you so you won't have to do all this due diligence. We'll do the checking of 501-c3s, etcetera. You can give overseas as long as it's through a recognized organization."

The other third is just what kind of platform do we have? We started a new IT [information technology] project. We spent a million dollars on that. We did all of the analysis of what we need to be doing in order to serve our customers really, really well with the products that we give them. We've really done a lot of work in that area, whether it's HR, or whether it's IT or something else.

Then the third area was the community philanthropy. That's where we came up with the idea to transform education. It does not work for kids of color. We want to promote economic vitality and that's where immigration comes in. We need a workforce that's going to be here and stable and skilled.

We need to build social capital. How do communities speak and act in their own behalf instead of having me or somebody else speaking for them? How do we build that kind of leadership? There is leadership there; we just need to open up the paths where it can really thrive.

LD: I want to talk a little bit more about that, but, first we need to talk a lot more about that. You said, "This is my community. This is why I chose this job." You grew up here. You've seen it develop. Talk to me specifically about the Latino community and how you've seen it change and grow from when you were a little girl to now.

SV: I have seen the Latino community really grow. I have to say that my experience has been a bicultural experience, because my parents chose to plop us into the white community and say, "Figure it out, you guys. You're not going to have this protection around you all the time." So I think that really helped in terms of my understanding that we had to make things happen for ourselves, that we weren't passive. I had a grandmother who was really...she would just be yelling at people. If she thought she was disrespected, that was the end of it. She'd yell at the bus driver if he didn't wake her up when she was supposed to get off for her stop.

LD: [laughter]

SV: She was just like this really vibrant woman, and my mother was, too. The women in my family in particular are really verbal against all odds, so those are the role models that I had. The men tended to be a little bit more laid back and a little bit quieter. I had all these women. When I think of a board of directors, I think of all my *tias* and all my *abuelas*. They're all sitting there at the table and making decisions for the family.

That was the role model that I had. Then I went to these girls' schools. I went to Saint Margaret's. Then, I, eventually, went to Saint Kate's. I'm out in the world, so I've had women, strong women as models.

Well, let me tell you what that did for me and what it didn't do for me. One of the things it did for me is that it really allowed me to open my mouth whenever I felt like it, and to give my opinion and to say, "I'm here." I remember going into Chicano [Casa de] Esperanza[?], which is an organization over on the North Side, early - before Centro Cultural Chicano - where I would disagree with what was going with an election or something. I know that my brothers, those men, were just furious with me that I would open my mouth. It really created some consternation, because there's this tension - "What do you think your place is, Sandy?"

I've seen it develop and grow. I've also seen the shadow side of our community, where people get into these fights about who should be leading and who should doing whatever. I would feel, "It's time to grow up, you guys!"

Well, let me tell you, one of the low points for me was that I wanted to run for regent at the U of M [University of Minnesota], and I did. Then a letter come forward from two Latinos, who shall go unnamed, that were just ripping me to shreds to all the legislators. Do you know what that is? It's internalized oppression, because they couldn't ever see me succeed in that way. For some reason, what it said to them is that if I got to that position, I was going to get somewhere with them or without them, obviously. It was so sad to see that they felt that my success would be their deficit.

LD: Right. It would be threatening them.

SV: It would be threatening. That made me go to the Hispanic Women's Development Corporation even more energized, not that I wanted to play against men, but it was just that we needed to figure things out. Now I think we're hopefully much beyond that. We still have political battles and that's legit. I'm not in the non-profit community with everybody kind of scraping for money, so I don't see that as much a part of the conversation.

The one thing that I am really concerned about is that when I was at Hennepin County, we didn't fill up the county boardroom. We did not. We think somebody else is going to do some of this work.

LD: Yes.

SV: We have to get beyond self-interest. It can't be about who gets credit. It's got to be about how do we move the community forward? The only way that I can think about that is through some of the work that I've done in the past and that I'm doing now. If we spend a lot of time fighting among ourselves, it just doesn't get the work done.

LD: Right.

Let's talk about that. Let's talk about where we need to go, and link it to the work that you're doing here. Where do we need to go as a community to move forward?

SV: From my own personal opinion, it is the issues that I talked about earlier...all three of them. Transforming education for our children has to be a number one issue. We have got to get Latino parents on the road to making sure their kids succeed. Their kids are failing, especially those kids that are coming in speaking Spanish as their first language. They're not getting enough help here. I just visited Minneapolis Academy [Academy of North Minneapolis], a charter school. I've talked to Bernadeia Johnson [Superintendent, Minneapolis Schools] and Valeria Silva [Superintendent, Saint Paul Schools]. I think Saint Paul is doing a little better. Bernadeia sees scads of kindergartners that are coming in speaking Spanish. We do not have enough Spanish-speaking teachers. So we have to transform education. What we're trying to do is make sure that we have great teachers with the right skills in every classroom. That's one thing.

Secondly, we've got to get the parents on board. One of the things that we're trying to do here—we're just thinking this through—is what kind of movement do we need to start creating. We're working with MCTC [Minneapolis Community and Technical Schools] and the Mexican Council and PACER Center. They're starting to pull together a Latino parents conference. We're right in the middle of that. We're working with the district, too, just saying, "This is a problem." The Minneapolis Public Schools has decided to bring Noble High School [in Chicago] which is a Latino group that's run by Latinos - Pablo Sierra in Chicago. They have very poor kids coming into their high school, and they're graduating ninety-six percent and they're going to four-year colleges. That's the model we need here.

LD: Yes, exactly!

SV: Education is number one, and we've got to get Latino parents on the track of really pushing their kids, like your dad and mom did, like my parents. We need those parents multiplied thousands of times.

The whole question of immigration is based on the fact that Minnesota has to have immigrants in order to sustain a workforce on a low-skill side and a high-skill side. We're starting to develop a strategy. We're connected to a Chicago global advisory group that is putting CEOs front and center and trying to get comprehensive immigration reform as a sensible conversation instead of the talk radio stuff that we hear. We're working mostly with the Minnesota Chamber here and the Immigrant Law Center, who are going out and

having meetings in different parts of the state. We just had seven meetings, and had conversations about the importance of immigration reform. We will be teeing up a strategy to get more information out to the public about how important it is to have immigrants, and to have these workforce folks legalized. That's something we're doing.

On the issue of building social capital, we're trying to figure out what would be helpful in these communities of color, under-represented communities, in terms of supporting leadership. We're pondering that question. We know there's leadership there. What's the best way to get at it? We're thinking about a series of meetings with different communities to have the conversation about what is needed in order to move the agenda forward?

I could tell you a whole lot more. We're doing a lot more, but I think that's kind of the basics of it.

LD: What are you proud of?

SV: What I'm proud of is that I have a family that has supported each other, and I'm part of that support. I'm proud of the fact that my nieces and nephews are pretty much all going to college, and that there is that assumption. I'm proud of the fact that I was able to do some work here in the community at different levels, a lot from a leadership level, and I hope I've done good work there. But I am also somebody who tries to mentor or tries to talk with people and encourage them in moving forward. None of us is going to be here forever, so any way we can pave the way for others to come behind us. Like Gloria Bettis, who I've tried to hire a zillion times. I've tried to hire Luz Maria Frias a zillion times. I'm always reaching out and trying to figure out, we have this job. Get ready for thinking about it this way. It will not happen unless we are a little bit more planful about it. But I'm really proud of the fact that I can stand with my other community members and say that we're part of a great community. Even though we've got a little bit of a shadow side, there are still great things coming out of the Latino community.

LD: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

SV: I think that there ought to be more Latinos running for public office, and when people say that to me - maybe in a retirement kind of mode, I might. But I don't know, not the way it feels right now. [Laughter] That's good.

LD: Okay. Once again, thank you so much. We know how busy you are, so we really, really appreciate you taking the time and sharing your story.

SV: You're welcome. I hope it's what you needed.

LD: It is wonderful!