

Interviewee: Rodriguez, Armando

Interview Date: August 3, 2009

University of Houston
Oral History Project
"Mexican American History, Politics, Fiestas Patrias"

Interviewee: Armando Villarreal Rodriguez

Date: 08/03/09

Location: Raul C. Martinez Courthouse on Macario Garcia Drive.

Interviewer: Natalie Garza

Transcriber: Carol Valdés

NG: This is Natalie Garza. I'm interviewing Judge Armando Rodriguez on August 3rd, 2009, in his office at the Raul C. Martinez Courthouse on Macario Garcia Drive.

Okay, can you give me your full name please?

AR: My name is Armando Villarreal Rodriguez.

NG: And when were you born?

AR: Born in February the 4th, 1940.

NG: Where were you born?

AR: Houston, Texas, 1410 Rothwell in what they used to call the "Bloody Fifth", Fifth Ward.

NG: Fifth Ward? What area of town is that in? I mean I know they call it the "Fifth", but where is it located?

AR: Exactly, you know where San Jacinto comes into I-10? It's actually, I-10 goes right over my birthplace, and once you cross that bridge right there you go into what is "*El Quinto*" and it's on the other side of Rothwell, going down where to across that bridge across I-10, and that's where the place is located.

NG: Why do they call it the "Bloody Fifth"?

AR: Well, at that time it was pretty violent. There were a lot of Mexicanos there and a lot of things went on that obviously, by the definition, involved a lot of violence

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with the people, the police, and everyone else.

NG: So was the neighborhood predominantly Mexicanos?

AR: Yes, yes it was, quite a bit, because as a matter of fact, that's really the heart of where the Mexicano community was involved, and elsewhere. Jones Elementary School was, and Hennessey Park, and Saint Patrick's Church, which was a big part of the Hispanic community. From there out to Guadalupe Church in the 2nd Ward was a large congregation of Mexicanos. As a matter of fact, at the time they had what they call now, called then, "Pachucos." These were individuals from the neighborhood and most of them wore khakis, Stacey Adams, real sharp dressers, shirts and everything and that's an area that was a whole area that had been misunderstood as far as the "Pachucos" were concerned because they were taken as thugs, and criminals, and thieves and everything. And, actually, what they were is just protecting their own community because there was no other protection. The police didn't work with us. As a matter of fact, the police were part of what were the problem, you know. So it's, the Mexicano is very family oriented and then there was these young men that were doing the, and the older men doing the protection from other communities and other people outside of the community.

NG: Where did you go to high school?

AR: To Davis High School. As a matter of fact, you see from Jones they went to Marshall Junior High and then to Davis, which were all predominantly Mexicano at the time.

NG: And you continued your education after that?

AR: I went to the University of Houston and got my Bachelor Degree in Business

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Administration and, then, went to the University of Houston Law School and got my Doctorate, Juris Doctorate.

NG: What was the University of Houston like at the time?

AR: Well I was, at the time, I was, I think, one of three students that were Hispanic and there might have been one before then, but it was a surprise. As a matter of fact, most people, most of the lawyers of that time, went to either South Texas or Texas Southern and there were, it was rare to have a University of Houston graduate, but I was one of them. One of the other guys that went to school with me as a matter of fact was Raul Gonzales and he then became the Supreme Court Justice and the first here in Texas.

NG: What made you decide to continue your education because that, as you were saying, that there weren't a lot of Mexicanos or Latinos in college at that time?

AR: That's a good point. Well, I loved school and my parents encouraged this. As a matter of fact, there was never a doubt in my mind that I was going to go to college. When I was going to elementary school I knew I'd go through junior high, high school, go to college and then just get a degree. As a matter of fact, at a very young age I knew that I was going to be a lawyer. So right from even elementary, to me everything was just getting things out of the way until I went to law school and became a lawyer and started practicing. I had no idea about being a judge. That came later. But I knew I was going to be a lawyer.

NG: What made you want to be a lawyer?

AR: My mother. My mother, she just put that idea in my head. As a matter of fact, when I think I was, she was pregnant with me, there was a car accident which

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involved them going to court, and ever since then she said I was going to be a lawyer, and essentially I was. I went through elementary school at Jones and made very good grades. I took the hardest courses. I just enjoyed it. I kept looking forward to school. I became, of course, an honor student there and then went to Marshall and Jeff Davis and graduated with honors from Jeff Davis. As a matter of fact, I was the only boy that graduated with honors. The rest of them were girls.

NG: Did your parents encourage education?

AR: Oh, absolutely. They were very much believers in education. Neither one of them went past the third or fourth grade, but they were very intelligent and very mature. As a matter of fact, when I was a full fledged lawyer and was practicing, I used to take the cases that would come to me, and legal problems, and go and ask my parents what they would do to resolve the problem, you know. And usually they had the same answer as I , with all my legal training and knowledge, arrived at. You know, they would give me good answers. So, yes it's, they very much encouraged. All my brothers and sisters finished high school and most of them finished college too. My older brother was an accountant. My next brother was a teacher, and he taught computer and music in the schools that we had here in the colleges.

NG: Your parents, where were they from?

AR: My mother was from Chihuahua, and my father was from Linares. That's the little city on the other side of Monterrey.

NG: And where they married before they came here?

AR: Oh no. They came here around 1908 and then they were part of this community.

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As a matter of fact, they were active in the community, and my mother was very active in the festivities for Saint Patrick's Church up in Hennessey Park, and Also, both of them were instrumental in helping finance and build Guadalupe Church, which was the mainstay for the Hispanic community there. As a matter of fact, my dad as a self- taught musician, he had the first band that was there to raise funds for Guadalupe Church. And my mother, of course, she helped coordinate and organize everything else that was going on. She started a grocery store and she had the Dolores Rodriguez Flower Shop. So she was business minded, and helped, well many of the community establish themselves.

NG: And, before you became a lawyer, did you have other types of jobs?

AR: Never worked in my life, except for one summer intern in a law office with an attorney, Mr. Knight, Zach Knight, because like I said, I knew I was going to be a lawyer so I just, my mother knew him and put me to work with him for a summer and that's it.

NG: So after law school where did you work?

AR: After law school, well actually, as a senior in law school, I looked for employment and I found, that was started then as the Houston Legal Foundation, and that was one of the first, what they call "proctors" in the Houston Legal Foundation. That's a senior law school. It's kind of like an intern with the medical doctors. I was an intern there working under a lawyer in my senior law school year under Carol [Fielden]. Then when I graduated from there I started working with the Legal Foundation. So I practiced with them for a year or two and then I went into private practice with a firm that I mentioned now with Nino, what is it?

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Nino Robert, you have the name there, I believe, don't you?

NG: Ummm No.

AR: I was trying to remember the names of this. It was Martinez, Sanchez, Nino, and Rodriguez. As a matter of fact, it was the largest law firm Mexicana because they didn't have very many Mexicano lawyers, and we were right there on Canal, 103 Canal, 301 Canal, and we practiced there until, actually, I was appointed to a city judge. I was the first city judge, full-time city judge under Mayor Welch. And then, from there, I was appointed to the county under the County Judge Bill Elliot. And from there of course I was elected, I have been elected ever since. And I've been, that was in 1973, so I've been in office since then. And as I said, now, all over the State of Texas, I've got the longest tenure of any of the JPs in the state.

NG: I heard there were some firsts with you being, getting this position.

AR: Right.

NG: What can you tell me about that?

AR: Well, I was the first Mexicano Justice of the Peace in Harris County, here and Harris County and the first in the city.

NG: And you said this is an elected position?

AR: Yes it is.

NG: So can you talk about, why that's a big deal?

AR: Well, it's important because until you see that something is possible you think it's impossible. After it's done, we've done many things are impossible. We then, people are able to achieve that plateau, like the glass ceiling that we were talking about. As a matter of fact, teasingly one of my chief clerks that was here made the

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comment when somebody asked for something I said, “ Ah, man I’m tired of people asking me to do the impossible” and you know, and then she looked at me, she’s very intelligent, she’s a lawyer too now, she says, “Wait a minute, wait a minute. When have you done the impossible?” I said, “Many times”. She goes, “Give me an example.” I said, “Well like Fiestas Patrias.” To get everybody to work together because it’s renowned that in the Hispanic community you have people always in groups and organizations and they never worked together, you know. And they do there. She says, “Well, what do you mean? You had to get everybody to want to do Fiestas Patrias and participate?” I says, “Everybody wants to do that. What are you talking about?” I mean, you know there is not an organization, as a matter of fact it’s gone coast to coast, you know, it’s well known. I said, “Yes, Rose, now everybody wants to participate, but when we started, okay, nobody wanted the work.” They were afraid to. They were ashamed to because the Hispanic was considered second class. I as a lawyer had the same training as everybody else, but sometimes you would see that if they were represented by a Mexican lawyer, you were represented by second class representation. And I’ve always strived to, you know, to change that. Got to get the best representation, period. in this court, I try to do that sometimes. Well, they used to call it the “Supreme Court of the East End.” Some in a kidding way, some in a laughing way. But, I didn’t mind them saying that because Supreme is respected. Supreme means, you know, like Supreme Court is the best court isn’t it? I said, “Fine. As long as they understand it, that there is quality.” And that is what we try to strive here. I said many times you get the same representation here

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or quality of legal service that you do across town because they say, “Well, across town it’s an Anglo community, it’s a gringo community so everything is good over there.” Well, everything is good here. And once people find that out and the communities change tremendously. A lot of it is the mindset. We, ourselves, would keep us down. We, ourselves, thought we were second class. Okay? And that’s what had to change. I’ve never had that problem because like I said from the beginning, even in elementary school. I was, I loved school so some people would say I was a favorite of the teacher or the “Teacher’s Pet,” or whatever. They used to give me the special projects and so forth. All I knew is I enjoyed doing it. I enjoyed working with schools, and yes the teachers did like me because of that, and I enjoyed it. I became, of course, “Patrol Boy” which was an honor. What you then, you have a you know, I’d say everybody looks up to you for any questions. As a matter of fact, even as a kid in elementary school I remember that my friends, when there was a problem, they would bring it to me. “Wait ‘till Armando gets here. Wait till Mando gets here.” They would bring it to me and I would, you know, resolve it in that time so it just happened. I mean, I didn’t plan it that way, but I think that’s very important, that we understand the quality is important, the integrity. You know, I’ve said before many times that the Hispanic community has the qualities that everyone wants. They cherish the family. They take care of their elders. You know, you find very rarely, maybe now, but you used to find very rarely that an elderly person in the family was in the nursing home. We take care of them ourselves. If there is a problem, we take care of them, you know, and we believe in virtue, we believe in religion, we believe in the

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church. All of these qualities that everybody always looks for and say, "Oh those are good qualities." They are good qualities and I say that virtue is universal. All over the world, all over the world, good is good. In however they want to describe it, amounts to the same thing.

NG: Can you describe to me the precinct where your, you preside over?

AR: Sure. Well, it started out very near the same boundaries. Geographically, you wanted me to describe it or what it's, with people in it? Because it started out with almost one third, one third, one third. One third black, one third Hispanic, one third Anglo and I was glad to see that because, to me I relate, very easily, to these other groups. Like I said, it just didn't even occur to me that we were any different. We just, we all were after the same thing and, consequently, that's the kind of group that we had. There's a lot of industrial people, a lot of community people, and then, even, some of the downtown, but most importantly, it was, they considered it, you might say the "Barrio." You know, and some people might be even afraid to come over. Some people are still afraid to come over here, until they do. The ones that come over here and they see, as a matter of fact, the businesses, the banks, the churches, everything that's going on, they want to come over here. As a matter of fact, when the banks, this wasn't that long ago, we didn't have that many banks and when we were trying to get them in here because we already had, besides this courthouse, which we built ourselves, the banks didn't want to come in because they'd say, "Well, they don't have money over there." And we went to them, we'd go to them and say, "Well, what do you mean we don't have money? They had money. They have money." They'd say, "Well,

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but we don't see it." "No, they had money, but they keep it under their mattress." They'd say, "Well, why is that?" "Because they don't trust banks. They don't trust you. You have to earn their trust." And sure enough now you'll see banks. They have sprouted out all over this community. As a matter of fact, almost every bank, every business is one of the top drawers in the whole county. So yes, there's a lot here, once you get to know them, and there are some very fine people.

NG: How has it changed over the years?

AR: Well,

NG: In terms of the people?

AR: I guess, you might say people have come in from outside with their business and their attitude, and that's kind of changed the people here. The ones that were originally here, well, they adjust, and now it's, it's a little more commercial, it's a little more distant. Just like when you go outside of the city of Houston, even here, many times people say, "Well, you mean you were born here in Houston? You're a native Houstonian? Those are rare." I'd say, "No, they're not rare." I'd say, "I know a lot of them." You know, but I know them. We know each other. The same way here, in the community. Some of the ones that have been here, they know each other. So the ones that are new, they come in and they [] is different. So it's changed in that respect. A lot more businesses that there are, you might say statewide or national, rather than the personal businesses that are here. There's still a lot of small businesses, a lot of small businesses. As a matter of fact, some of the people here have gone to other parts of the county, and almost anywhere in the county you are going to find some Mexican restaurant with Mexican food or,

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because, some of the Mexicanos that are working in those areas.

NG: What precinct number is this?

AR: This is Precinct Six. See, in Harris County there is eight precincts and that's they're numbered one through eight. In each precinct you have two judges of the peace, two justices of the peace, and one constable. So you have sixteen justices of the peace and eight constables, and this is Precinct Six. Now I'm Place Two because I'm the senior judge in this particular area.

NG: And geographically, what does Precinct Six encompass?

AR: Well, from north side, do you know where north side is?

NG: No.

AR: That's the other side of town and around the 610 Loop, mostly inside the 610 Loop and the east end of town. So it's down I-10 and then right over there down by Sims Bayou, inside of 610, and then we go outside through Gulfgate, Telephone Road all the way to Bellfort, and come down back to 45 to town and right back up to the north side. Mostly inside the 610 Loop.

NG: Was the courthouse always located here?

AR: This one, yes.

NG: Okay.

AR: Okay. In 1974, in '73 they didn't have a courthouse here. We were all downtown. As a matter of fact, it was a redistricting, because there only used to be, I think, five judges, five justices of the peace, and then, at that time they redistricted it and made it into eight, which is what we have now. So this was then purchased at that time. It used to be an old church, a funeral home, and many other things like that,

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and we moved in here in an old building. It wasn't this building. It was an old building and they just remodeled that and they put both judges and the constable there, and then they moved one out at a time, and then about, now it's been about ten, fifteen years ago. Not that long that we started building this particular courthouse and that took a while because they didn't want to fund it. They kept saying, "No, we don't have money. We don't have money." They gave enough money for a court building, okay, and they said, "Okay, we'll build you a courthouse, just the court." I said, "No, I don't want just the court. I want the constable to be here. I want the county clerk to be here. I want the tax office to be here, and politically, it's a political decision. I just wouldn't allow it until they could give us the whole ball of wax, which they'd say, "Well, if you don't spend the money now, that we are going to spend it some place else." I'd say, "Well, go ahead. We'll wait until we get everything." So it took two more years, two or three more years. They would add a little bit more. I would say, "Okay." So finally they had enough until they built this courthouse, and this courthouse is built around the other old courthouse, okay. I went around with my chief clerk and we picked the brick, we picked the roof, we picked the design. We helped one of the engineers from downtown, as a matter of fact, this is the courthouse according to Rex, the guy that did it, that was never going to be built. He said, "It's not going to be done." Well, we just strived, strived and we had pictures, we were working with him, until we got everything that we wanted, well, almost everything. We had the constable's office, we have the commissioner, we have the tax office, and we have the court. So, people that come in here, they love it,

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come in and get service on that basis, and it's a beautiful courthouse, as you can see. As a matter of fact, it's one of the most beautiful courthouses in the county. People, now come here and look at this and use this as a model to build other courthouses. So, we are proud of that.

NG: Why was it important for you to have everything here in this one building?

AR: It wasn't important for me, necessarily. It was important for the community, because otherwise, again, you're being shortchanged. Downtown you have everything together. The other annexes, they would combine them, and so we wanted the same thing here, but everything, remember first-class. And they responded. The day that we did they groundbreaking, it was a great celebration, and you know, usually, you have three or four people, use the shovel to do the groundbreaking. We had people waiting that would do the shovel and the other people would go and do the shovel, and there was a long line of, the community was very involved in participating and they were very aware how important it was that we have this happening here, because you had nothing else, nothing else. Once we got this, then, banks started coming in, and other businesses started coming in and flourishing and so forth. Different types of businesses, and national businesses, you know.

NG: Is the ethnic background of the people in the precinct, is it fairly diverse still, or is it primarily Mexicans?

AR: Well, it's getting more diverse, but it's still primarily Mexican, or Hispanic, because you have several Anglo communities that are still there, but now they are intermixed, interracial.

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NG: Why was it important for you to take this job? Was it an option for you to?

AR: Yes, it was. It was an option. As a matter of fact, I mentioned a person to you last time, A. John Castillo. See that's what's important. People don't know the individuals that really created these. Like I told you that my parents and their friends helped found and formed Guadalupe Church, okay. A. John Castillo used to work for the railroad, and he was very, a very political individual. He worked with another person, for instance, name of Ted Garcia who was working for labor and they were involved politically. They worked with Mayor Welch, with Squatty Lyons, with Judge Bill Elliot, and these people were, Judge Elliot was the county judge commissioner, Squatty Lyons was the commissioner, and of course, the mayor. They were very instrumental in helping our community establish itself. Sometimes, people talk about doing things effectively. Well, we figured that the best way to be effective is work through the system instead of outside of the system. People were used to working outside the system and you know about that, but those that worked through the system, most of them don't get the credit. But A. John Castillo has put a lot of these politicals that have been throughout these years, into office, because of working as such. Laura Cruz, who was the first state representative Hispanic that we had here, was put in by them, by John and his people. Not just himself, there was Reverend Navarro, and other people like that. But, John, as a matter of fact, was my godfather and fifteen years old, the quincienera, I stood for his daughter, so, consequently, we were very close, and I guess he kind of kept an eye on me when I was coming through being a lawyer and so forth, and he got me involved in the communities, in different

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organizations, which I mentioned before. We had an organization called HCCAA, that's Harris County Counsel, Harris County Community Action Association. That was a federally funded poverty group that John got me involved in there as a board member, and we worked with the people there. Frank Partida was the president then. Joe Garza was involved. Olga Solis, Johnny Mata was working for him, okay. This was the organization. I was on the board so we did a lot of things from there. And then, we organized this, the United Organizations Information Center, because one of the big problems that we had was, again, that of people had groups [individual] groups, but they didn't have one voice. So this United Organizations Information Center allowed everybody to join and to participate, liberal and conservative, and we then would sit down and work things out from there. Ben Canales was also a very important person in there, and Abe Ramirez. Abe was the president, I was the vice president, and Ben was the lawyer. Well, in doing this and establishing someone on the board to represent the Hispanic community, because they had a board, a poverty board, that spend thousands or millions of dollars [throughout] our community and we didn't have a Hispanic representative. So, I was elected to be that and then, of course, whatever else happened from there John would get me involved. And I was born here, so we knew everybody, so we'd work as a group in the community. And the election came up for Mayor Welch, in which, Fred Hofeinz was challenging him. Fred was pretty well established and a lot of Hispanics said, really went for Fred too. So he was very strong, and he was a strong challenge. But, we were with Mayor Welch because of John Castillo, A. John Castillo. Fred got him into a runoff and in the

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runoff we were able to prevail and win. So, we established our credentials there, and then Mayor Welch called me, as matter of fact. I was already a practicing lawyer. He called me and he asked me if I would accept being a judge of the City of Houston and, frankly, I told him that I'd have to think about it because I had a good practice, and I picked up the phone and I called A. John Castillo and I told him what had happened. He says, "Take it." I said, "What do you mean?" "Yeah, take it. Take it. We've been trying to get a full-time judge in the city. We've been trying for the longest time. Take it." I didn't think twice about it. I just hung up and called Mayor Welch back and I took the position. So, it's something that they knew about. I was in my practicing law. That he was aware of the significance of it that we're talking about here. So, consequently, I became the first Hispanic to be a full-time judge for the City of Houston. Ironically, it was, I guess it meant a lot, because as I sat there people would just go just to look at me. "There's a Mexican judge!" you know. "What's he going to be like?" and so forth. And there were a lot of trials and tribulations with not only police officers, but lawyers and everybody that wanted to test the new judge, Hispanic judge. Remember, to them the Hispanic, they just didn't have the quality. So I, as a matter of fact, I rewrote all of the procedures for the City of Houston at that time, for my court. And the rest of the judges, they saw that and they started using it for them too. So that was when I realized the significance of it because after that I mean, I was already with organizations and we would go to neighborhoods and meet and, of course, they wanted to meet the new judge and, I guess what pinpointed it to me was as I was coming off one of the speeches that I was making to an organization because I

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used to talk to them, just go and, and I would ask them, “Well, what...” They’d say, “What kind of, what...?” Let’s see, I’m losing my train of thought here. Let me finish telling you what impressed me. Coming off one of the speeches, in the crowd, a lady came up with her little boy, and she asked me, “Can, can, can he just shake your hand? Can he just touch you?” I said, “Sure,” and I shook his hand. I talked to him like they do. He was a pretty little boy, and she said, “He’s never touched a judge before.” So, I mean, what else can that tell you? That, anyway, that’s the significance. Then I knew that, you know, it was important, and that it was a good thing.

NG: So you can see now, also, the importance to the community, particularly.

AR: Oh, absolutely. What I started telling you before, when I would meet with the groups, because I love talking to kids, and see these families that didn’t have an education, okay, admittedly, and what I would ask them, I said, “You know, it’s important to get an education.” Everybody says that. They would say, “Well, yeah, of course, we want our kids to get educated.” I said, “Well, what you have to remember that there’s two kinds of education.” They said, “What do you mean?” “Well there’s an education that you get in school, in college, and the education that life gives you.” Because remember these adults didn’t have a formal education. They didn’t have any chance of getting a formal education, and when I would say that, then I would stop and we talk about something else then they’d come back and say, “Wait a minute. Wait a minute. What do you mean there’s two kinds of education, the formal and that life gives you?” I’d say, “Yes.” They’d say, “Which is the more important?” Always, they’d ask me that. I’d say,

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“The education that life gives you.” Because I’d give them an example of my father and my mother, they had a third grade education, yet when I would pose to them the same legal questions and look for an answer, they gave me the answer that I would arrive at, which was the right answer. What’s right is right. With their experience, with their knowledge. So, again, this made these people have some kind of hope and that’s really what you wanted to do. Instill the hope in them that they are not worthless, that they’re worth something, and just because they don’t have a degree or formal education doesn’t mean that they can’t be respected, and be important, and worthwhile. As a matter of fact, in the Hispanic community, it used to be that if you wore a coat and tie you were respected. Okay? “Oh, he’s got a coat and tie,” he’s respected. And, sometimes, that would be working to, I guess, to their advantage. But, I’ve always said, you know, whether you’re an expert or not, what counts is the merit of what you are espousing. You may be wearing blue jeans, or raggedy clothes, or whatever. If you’re telling the truth or saying something, there are a lot of smart people, that’s what you evaluate. That’s how you evaluate the person. Not by the clothes they’re wearing, but by what they are really saying. Anyway.

NG: What do you think it means for people to come here knowing that you’re the head judge here, for Hispanics to come here and, either, if they come into your courtroom or if they have to meet with the other offices?

AR: Well, of course, it varies because, now you have a lot more judges of higher, of even higher rank. As a matter of fact, and now you have Hispanic judges. It’s not the same. But, it’s always been significant to me, when you do take a position, no

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matter who it is, what and how you establish the image there, and I think the law is very, very important in everybody's life. No matter who you are, you're going to have need of knowledge of the law. A good lawyer, they told him many times, "Oh, we have too many lawyers." That's not true. Good lawyers, is what you want, okay. And if you have a good lawyer representing you, then you're in good shape. If you just have, that you have good teachers, good servicemen, good engineers, good mechanics, it's not all the same. So just because, now you're in a position, how you execute that position is very important. So, yes, they come here, hopefully they can see. Of course, not everybody's going to be happy. I tell them that. In a case, necessarily by law, somebody's going to lose and somebody's going to be unhappy. But the thing is, as long as you are doing and applying fairly for what it is, people recognize it, and I've been blessed with friends and people that, even sometimes if they're not friends, they see what I do and they respect it, and that's what at the very least I expect. The respect and recognition of what I do. Never mind what they think of me. What is done is very important, and try to carry that forth.

NG: I want to move on, a little bit, to some community organizations. You've mentioned a couple that you were involved in. The HCCAA, and, I believe, it's.

AR: United Organizations Information Center.

NG: Have you been involved in any other community organizations?

AR: Oh, many, many. Some were established like the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, the Chamber of Commerce. I just got a reward from the rotary, and many other little organizations, you know, like Family Clinic and the mutualistas. Most

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organizations want someone like myself to be involved. You know, with some of the legal organizations too. The Mexican American Bar and political organizations, so forth. I try to help any way I can. But now, thank goodness, there are a lot of other judges, a lot of other people, politicals that are involved there. Ben Reyes was an individual that was very, very involved, very effective, and he did a lot of good. I'm, I don't know if you've heard about Ben. He had a legal problem there which he served some time for, but people still respect him for the good that he did, and he did. He's still a wonderful guy. It's just a matter of, most of them are not heard of. As I've mentioned already, the ones that you won't hear them in the books – Ben Canales, Joe Garza, Sal Esparza, my father Jesus Rodriguez, and my brother Carlos Rodriguez. Carlos has been teaching, and in teaching he has instilled in his students a desire to really progress, and they have. They come, even now. Of course, they find me because it's easier to find me than it is to find him. But they just, they say they learn more about their lives not just teaching, not just a subject. That's the way he is. I wish you could have gone this last, as I've said before, you could have seen him working with the seniors, and bringing up that life into them, also. But, anyway, getting back to the beginnings of this community, in this city, goes back to Hennesy Park, Saint Patrick's Church, and to the Fifth Ward, as they call it the "Quinto," okay, and they went through Marshall Junior High, Jeff Davis, of course, in this area Milby, and so forth. But these were later. In the very beginning you had the community activists that, for instance, would celebrate the Diez y Seis de Septiembre, and this was the liberation of Mexico from the French. It was just in the community itself,

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but this is what they used. As a matter of fact, one of the ladies, she's passed away now, as I was practicing law, and of course, everything that I've done is to resolve problems, okay. That's the way, I'm just geared that way. You have a problem, tell me, and we'll resolve it. She came to me she says, "What can we do? What can we do? Armando," she says, "one, we can't get our people to get together, to work together, and everywhere we go we're thought of as less than, than good citizens, second class, and we were thought of negatively. Everything you hear about the Hispanic community is negative, it's bad. You know, what can we do to change that?" I thought about it and I said, "Well, what does everybody like to do? I don't know, fiesta. Everybody loves fiesta, everybody goes." People that don't like Mexicanos, they go to Mexico and they get to meet some people there and get what they are really like, and they come back and they say, "Oh, those people were wonderful! They were wonderful!" And I realized that those are the same people that are here, that are not thought of as wonderful because they don't know them. So, the first thing is to get people to work together, so they get to know each other. Then, you don't have to tell them how wonderful, they know. They form their own judgment. So what does everybody including the Anglos like to do is a fiesta, okay. I said, "What can we do that everyone would want to do?" "Well, Diez y Seis de Septiembre." So it's a national fiesta, Fiestas Patrias. Now, Fiestas Patrias has been celebrated for years, and years, and years. Our parents, we'd go out of town and play at the Fiestas Patrias, but then it just died away. We had Mexican Consulates that were here and thought of very, as very strict, very, very distant, and they always, they also looked at this community as

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inferior to the community in Mexico because we were here. “Oh, Mexicano, Mexicano.” Well, I knew about Mexicano. My daddy was a Mexicano. I was a Mexicano and I knew, you know. So, we put together what we now call Fiestas Patrias, and it was a parade, we put a parade downtown, and then added a festival, and then added a beauty pageant. The first parade had, I think, forty participants, and those were kind of sparse and far apart. But we had a parade downtown. It was a solid parade. Mayor Louie Welch helped us. See, again, because everybody was involved. We had the mayor there, we had the governor there. Politically, John Castillo knew them. John Castillo went in to be a good neighbor commissioner for our, one of the governors. So, he was involved. A guy by the name of Ted Garcia got people there. Politically, we got everybody there just to have a good time, okay. Never mind what else, just to have a good time. We formed a parade coming downtown. We announced it. At that parade we were coming down, the first one that we had, you had grown men crying because they had never seen that before. This is 1969. Then we formalized it and we made it an international because we found out not only Mexico got their independence, but so did, who is it, Chile, Nicaragua, a lot of the Spanish countries, okay, South America so, Costa Rica, and Guatemala. So I said, “Well, wait a minute. We don’t have to be just one. We want everybody in.” And we’d have blacks participating, we even had the Chinese participating. We had Ms. China participating. Come on man, your participating. So, we put everybody together, made it international, got the five international colors, and established it on that basis. Come have a good time. They got to know the community. They got to love

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the community. Hey, yeah. If there was a problem, they'd call on us and we met, when as a matter of fact, in that organization that I told you about, with the HISD and one of the functions that we were going to celebrate, they didn't have a holiday, you know. So, the kids missed school and participated, and as a matter of fact, they wanted to suspend them. As a matter of fact, they were, since they did, they wondered how they go marching around the administration building which was downtown, okay. So, they were going to suspend them and when they suspended them, then, again we met with the board, okay. As a matter of fact, the superintendent and all of are at their board meetings to resolve it because they, the kids wanted to get a little bit out of sorts. We says, "No, no, no, no. You do your part. But we had people that meet with them too. We met with the board and resolved it very easily by sitting across. We already had the credibility established, and it didn't take thirty minutes once they knew who was sitting, representing those people, and they said, "Okay, we'll take off their suspensions, and give them make-up tests." See how easy it was to resolve, because you work through the system and you establish the credibility, resolve that. As a matter of fact that's the area when Gregory Salazar and MAYO was re-elected, and Gregory was a student of my wife's. He was out their "raising cane" you know. He'd raise cane, they'd come to us, we'd resolve it. We could talk to Gregory. There wasn't anyone that we couldn't talk to. That's that was a strength that we had, and that's what we tried to keep, and so now, that's what's worked with so many people. We have good relations with the black community. As a matter of fact, I was on the committee for our, the committee for Israel, the Jewish

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community, American Jewish community for Israel. I'm the only one that was one the anti-defamation league office that they had here. My picture was at the top. When Mickey Leland was here, he started trying to establish himself with them, we helped. That's the whole idea, get everybody together, and it worked. And Mickey established, as a matter of fact, a tremendous program, going to Israel, taking kids to Israel in their program. Anyway, it's things like that, well, but this is later years. I'm talking about '69, '70, '74, and right on up to now. But before then, a lot of community people were involved, and they're the ones that established, really, what our community would be in the formal dances, the formal functions, and organizations like Sembradores de Amistad and LULAC, and mutualistas, and so forth.

NG: There are some things that you mentioned that I just want to get some details on. The students that skipped school, why were they doing that?

AR: Because it was a national holiday, a Hispanic national holiday, and they didn't give them a holiday. They had all other holidays, but they didn't have that. So they wanted to honor their Hispanic heritage. And the schools said, "No." They wouldn't recognize it. After that, they did. They recognized the holiday and that's what helped establish that.

NG: In meeting with the school board was it just as community people, or was it as an organization?

AR: It was representatives of the Hispanic community. Because, remember, we established the United Organization Information Center, which represented all of the Hispanic Organizations. As a matter of fact, when we were meeting, my office

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was at 550 Crest Building, which is downtown. We could see they were marching around. As a matter of fact, Ben Canales was one that I mentioned before, came up to my office and said, "Mando, we've got to go march with them." I said, "No, we don't have to march with them." And then he called Ben, Abe Ramirez, who was the president. I was the vice president. He said, "Abe, tell Mando we've got to go march with them. We've got to go march with our people." I said, "No, we're not going to march. They are our people, but keep this in mind, that's exactly what people want us to do, go out there and march. We have people marching, that's fine, but you also have to have people that when they meet with the board, and we will meet with the board, we're meeting with them eye to eye, not them looking down at us and us looking up with them. We are going to sit down," and sure enough, when they called us to meet we went, just the officers of this organization and they had coffee ready for us. Maybe it's insignificant to other people, but it was significant to them. We sat down in a very comfortable way, not in a fighting way and said, "What's the problem?" They asked us, "What do you want?" We said, "Well, you want them back in school? They'll be back in school. But they had threatened to suspend them or have them absent, and then they miss the tests. All we want is that they get back in school, no suspension, and that they have the ability to make up any tests that they missed. It's that simple." "You got it." It was that simple, because we were meeting eye to eye. That's been the whole purpose of establishing the image of our community at a level that again, I say show people how to treat other people, and there it is, bottom line. And many things have been resolved since on that basis. John Castillo, A. John

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Castillo, got a park named after him. Of course, he's passed away since then. But his family is proud. Isidro Gutierrez, another person that, again, was part of the same thing, building this community. He got a park named after him. Because it's the name of the park, but it's some kind of recognition of significance. People would go, "Hey, Isidro Gutierrez." "Hey, this is John." Who were they? So, again, it's just a matter of acknowledgement. Just of really a participation, in our country. Because we say, "It's our country." Many times they'd say, "Well, why don't you have the parade in the barrio?" I'd say, "We do. We do have it in the barrio, right downtown." Because the barrio, our barrio, is the whole City of Houston, the whole State of Texas, not one little corner that you want to put us in. We just don't accept any less. And when the people see that, and they see that, again, it's a reasonable thing, and yet if you have reasonable people, they will see it. Many times you have to say it before they realize it. "Oh, I didn't think about that." "Yeah, that's right."

NG: What year was that incident with the students? Do you know around what time?

AR: In the seventies.

NG: And how difficult was it to get Fiestas Patrias, the parade route, to get that authorized?

AR: Not very. Because, remember, we had all the power of the mayor, the county judge, and all of the other elected officials. We had the governor, okay. So, again, we were working within the system. And again, these were fabulous people that were like us. We wanted to do something good. Mayor Welch, Squatty Lyons, Bill Elliot, tremendous, tremendous individuals. They had the power. All they had

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to say is, as a matter of fact, there was an incident when I was riding with the mayor in one of the parades, and we were riding together, and some of the police officers, they still, remember I was still a Mexican, and if I told them something, they weren't going to do it. So I was next to the mayor, and I deliberately saw that one of the senior officers standing by or something like that, and I said, "Officer, officer," he looked around at me, "I need you to do this." He was about to, you know, "What do you mean? You need me to do that?" And the mayor was right next to me. The mayor turned around and looked at him and I said, "Did you understand what I said? You need to do this." He looked at me and he looked at the mayor and he did what I said, not because I said it, but he still did what I said. Now, what was the significance of that? Just what I said before. Why didn't he do it, it was right, just because I said it? But in this case, again, the mayor was there. So he said, "Man, you better do it." When I went and sat on the bench, as a matter of fact, this is something that nobody knows because, except the few people were close to it, the presiding judge at that time. You see, I was the first Hispanic and Judge [] was the first black, and he had been there before me, so when I got there he was kind of a trailblazer. I just, "Hey, when are we starting?" "Yeah" We get this courtroom, a little courtroom and there was, the only thing that was new there was a phone and a little desk, a little bitty one. So I got there and I said, "Fine." I got my clerks, and everybody started cleaning the place up. My own clerks, because they wanted to do that. They put carpet in there, got a carpenter in there to put some shelves, put a TV up, et cetera. It was a beautiful, I mean a beautiful office. Even in the city, they kept saying, "Wow, that's a good office

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over there.” They kept talking about it. Well, the presiding judge didn’t like that. The presiding judge, as a matter of fact, when I was appointed, the day I was sworn in, he came up to me and said, “Why haven’t you come to me?” I said, “About what?” “Your appointment. The mayor appointed you. Why didn’t you come talk to me? I’m the presiding judge. I want to talk to you at 2’ o clock in the afternoon.” I said, “Okay, fine.” I went over there and he was talking to somebody and I sat down and he sat down. “Yeah, well, I’ve got to talk to somebody, I’m talking to somebody, but we’ll get together, come to the office and... So then, he turned to me and said, “I want you to understand this. I tell you what to do. I’m the presiding judge, and you do what I say.” Just like that. “You do what I say. Do you understand that?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He went on, and he said, “Do you have any questions?” I said, “No, not until you finish.” “So, I’m finished.” I said, “Okay, but I’m going to tell you this. You ask that I respect you. I’ll respect you as long as you respect me. You ask why I didn’t come to you. Because the mayor appointed me. He didn’t ask me to come to talk to you. He appointed me because we helped him stay in the mayor’s office.” I said, “So if you have any questions, you ask him.” And I went on and I let him know that again, I would respect him, but I wasn’t going to take any guff. As long as you respect me, I will respect him. His secretary came in, “Well, can I take him around to meet some of the other judges?” He said, “No, I’ll take him myself.” So we went to each of the courts, to the judges, and every one of them when they saw me, “Hey, this is the new judge? Yeah, I know him! Oh, man, good to see you again. Oh, you’ll make a good judge.” They had about nine or ten courts at that time. Each one of them, he’d

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introduce me, “Oh yeah, I know this lawyer! He’s a good lawyer. Man he’s going to make a good judge,” you know. So then we went back to his office afterwards and the guy that was waiting for him there and he went to him and “Hey, you just getting around here?” and the guy walked past him over to me and said, “Mando! Congratulations, you’re the new judge.” You know what he said, “Hell, do you know him too?” Do you know who it was? Ted Garcia, the labor man, who again, was involved politically, and politically you know, you help people. So again, I had that help from a lot of people. I didn’t do it myself. I’m not worried about taking credit for that. But what’s important is these people were significant and they’re never mentioned. You talk to labor, they know about him. Everybody in the community, they know A. John Castillo. As a matter of fact, some people were so rude as to be rude to John, and he would say, “Oh, wait a minute. I helped you get there.” They would say, “Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah,” you know. But he did, he did. Nobody does it by themselves. But we had the help. We had the help of the other communities and the black community, Judge []. Right now, Al Green, Congressman Al Green, well we co- chaired the Black and Brown Coalition. There’s a plaque from him recognizing that, since the 90’s. Why? Because we felt working together, get our communities together, and whenever there’s a big issue that would come up, together we would get our communities together and sit down and resolve the situation rather than go out and burn or raise hell, or those types of things, which, I mean, I don’t knock that. I mean, everybody has their own way of expressing what is done. As a matter of fact, I know I have a particularly, I remember sitting down in a large group with the bishop and him

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making that point because someone asked, "How can we get this done?" Or something like that. He said, "Well, you know they say that the squeaky wheel gets the grease." And everybody laughed, "Yeah, yeah, that's right, that's right." I got his, everybody's attention. I said, "Wait a minute. Bishop, with all do respect. You know you said the squeaky wheel gets the grease. That means go out and, well, that works with inanimate objects, people that can't think. We all here are reasonable individuals. So we should be able to present something reasonable and have it dealt with rather than saying the one that screams the loudest, because we are all reasonable people." That's the way I feel about it. Too many people have gotten their way by ranting and raving, or just being more powerful, or having the advantage. Well, you know, it works. No doubt about it. You see it all the time in business, in many other things. It works, but the question is, "Is that what it should be?" And I look at things like how should they be, not how can they be? There's a lot of things you can do, but is it that you should do them because you can? No. Ask the question, "What should you do?" not "What can you do?" Then do that. But anyway, I'm getting away with what you asked.

NG: Can you tell me a little bit more about the Black Brown Coalition?

AR: Sure. Sure, what do you want to know?

NG: Why was it started?

AR: Why was it started? Because we're reasonable people and just what I said now, there's a community, you know, that needs to be heard, and remember we are talking about three communities - major communities. It was in our interest, particularly, because one, you got a lot of votes in the black community, a lot of

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votes in the Anglo community, and not so many votes in the Hispanic community. But I figured if we work with all of the communities, usually, you have, there is somebody that, in one of the groups that wants to work against you, but if you have the other group with you, then you have the advantage. If the black want to work against you, then you have the other group with you. So, again, just thinking it through we said, "Well, wait a minute. We have, we want to accomplish the same thing. Why not join forces? You don't join forces because you are natural enemies. We have been for the longest time, okay. Remember, even in our own community we don't work together. Every community is the same way. The black community has their split too, and the Anglo community, the same thing. So, if you work in a united fashion, just because it's black and brown doesn't mean it's only black and brown. We take anybody that wants to work with us. That's the whole object. To unite your forces for a common good, or for a good. Because I believe if something is good for me or the Hispanic community, it is good for everybody. Remember universal virtue. If it's right, it's right. Talk about family values, talking about taking care of the elderly, talking about being generous, whatever. We all have the same needs and the same problems, and the same solution. People might not think so, but it's the same.

NG: What kind of issues has that coalition addressed?

AR: Well for instance, when under Kathy Whitmire, well, we didn't have a chief of police, okay. There was some new positions coming up and they were going to put some blacks, some Anglos, but not a Mexicano. So, Judge Green and I, and Reverend Lawson, and the people here, Dario and Frank, and the different

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precinct judges said, "Okay, fine. We'll coalesce, and we'll meet, we'll meet with them." We also brought in again, a representative of the FBI and we all sat down again. Being that's the case, they understand who we represent, we can sit down and talk. We sat down and worked it out. As a matter of fact, in that particular instance, and this you might say recorded history, nothing else, Kathy Whitmire said, even at that point, she said, "We are not going to have a Hispanic chief." That's the chief of police. "And if we do," because we wanted one particular guy "it's not going to be him." And with the coalition, we had an assistant chief, and it was him, who's been the only really Mexicano chief, until now. But, again, things like that under the other chief of police. The lady that was chief of police, we had a real delicate situation there, and she was pregnant. So, we are always gentlemen. We coalesced, met, and resolved some issues that needed to be dealt with there again, you know. As a matter of fact, after each, as a matter of fact, the last thing that we did that I remember, was with the basketball stadium, with Alexander, Leslie Alexander. You see, the blacks had gotten or asked for a contract, and the Hispanics supposedly, asked for that contracts, to get jobs or contracts under that stadium and then they didn't. So, we sat down and got Ben, what's his name, Ben Hall to file a lawsuit to halt those contracts. We coalesced on that basis, we mediated, we sat there from four in the afternoon to five in the morning negotiating. Have you ever been to a negotiation?

NG: No.

AR: Oh, it's fun! You know, your sitting here and then they have a group over there, and then they go back and forth and try to resolve it and everything. We resolved

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that, on that basis. The Black and Brown Coalition. After each one, we had everybody represented, the black community, the brown community, Leslie Alexander. And when we finished, inevitably after each time that we'd do that, somebody there says, "Oh man, with this coalition we can run the city. We can do this. Because we had all of those powerful forces there." And the same thing happened and I said, "No. Our agreement with the Black and Brown Coalition, when we resolve this matter and everybody goes back to their respective groups." Same thing with HCCAA when we finished there, I said, "No. Everybody goes back," and you work on that basis. "Some other big issue comes up, we'll get together, and direct ourselves as that, but stay together is a mistake." "Why, because then they want you to do everything." okay. You have groups that can do everything. You have groups. You know, you need food, you got somebody working on that. Hit something, the police, they work on that, okay. I recon with the same individuals, Johnny Mata being one of them. Then again, we're more effective that way, and we don't start in fighting, because once you resolve that problem, this one wants something, this one wants another. Are you going to, you've got to do it for her, or for them, or whatever. You got to work on things. The only thing we say is if you can't resolve something, then bring it to us. We worked on that basis.

NG: So the Black Brown Coalition is not a standing thing?

AR: No.

NG: It comes together to resolve issues?

AR: Exactly.

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NG: Is that the same thing with the U...

AR: No. The United Organizations Information Center was a monthly, we met on a monthly basis, and everybody would come. Whenever we were ready to present what they wanted then. That was disbanded a long time ago.

NG: Is there any similar organization that exists today that you think represents people within the community for issues?

AR: There, there are many. There are many. Yeah, some are church groups and they take up different issues, and so forth. There was about three years ago, was the last time I remember, four or maybe five, there was a Jewish group that got all the organizations together, Hispanic organizations, and in that discussion they said you know, the reason they were doing it is because no other Hispanic organization had put everybody together, and they asked, "Do you all know one?" And nobody could think of one, except one person who raised her hand. That was Olga Solis and they said, "Yes, who's that?" and she said, "Fiestas Patrias." Everybody is welcome. Everybody participates. You know, you have a place. You want a place, you have a place. You have something and work for that. And frankly, most of the people don't even know my role in Fiestas Patrias. Some people ask me, "Are you still with Fiestas Patrias?" "Well, yeah, what do you need?" "Well, this problem of." "Okay, we'll see."

NG: Was it difficult at first to get everybody organized for Fiestas Patrias?

AR: No, everybody likes to party.

NG: But, you said that you had a clerk that said that it wasn't the impossible, but at, in the beginning ...

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AR: No, she said...

NG: there would be some difficulties.

AR: Oh yeah, well of course, but this was, she was working for me here. This was Rosalinda Garcia, who was a professor. She taught Spanish, as a matter of fact, and I needed a clerk. She was recommended. She had never been in the legal field before. But she was a very sharp individual. She's from Monterrey. So she started working for me and sure enough, man she was a crackerjack. Pretty soon, she got to be chief in the office. So she got to know me. She would help with Fiestas Patrias. She'd help, she got to know everything that was going on you know, so that's why, at the time again, I made the comment so she could hear, and she bit on it. She said, "Wait a minute, what do you mean? You've done the impossible." She's smart, remember. "What do you mean? When have you done?" you know she said. But at that time it was impossible to put the people together, yet we did.

NG: And it was impossible because of the in-fighting?

AR: Oh, yeah. They wouldn't, even now, I'm just telling you this, even now there's groups that don't talk to each other. They hate each other, okay, but they'll talk to me. Why? Because, again, I've been their friend. There was, I think, as a matter of fact Chris, what's his name, that's run for office, and the lieutenant governor that's up there right now, what's his name, Dewhurst? Dewhurst? At one of the functions that we were, people would go up and, "I want you to meet Judge Rodriguez. He's my friend." He said, "Yeah, he's everybody's friend." How it he meant it, I don't know but it doesn't matter. Again, you know, it's a as people, literally, that cannot see or stand each other, but we still have communication

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because I respect them. I mean, you know, its, people say I'm very patient and I tell them I'm not. "I'm not patient, but I understand. If I understand, then we can communicate," you know. They think it's patience, but if I do something and somebody is upset, you understand why they get upset, then you work on that, resolve that, and you go from there. There have been people that have started out to be literally, they were on the opposite side with me, I would say that if they didn't hate me they pretty much hated me, that are very, working very closely with me now. One of them being a very close friend that I was going to tell you, you can talk to him. I just talked to him recently. Dario Arellano, he was with PASSO because PASSO was a strong political organization. When I came in, they actually helped us, put me in office because they helped the creation of the redistrict. They helped in the creation of Precinct Six, okay, and I benefited from that because, then, they appointed me and I was the judge in this precinct, along with another judge that didn't stay there very long, but some of the members of PASSO didn't like me because I worked independently from them. I worked with them, but still I worked independently. I'll support them or whatever, but I didn't want to be under their thumb. I just, I don't work that way. So, we had a meeting with a guy that came in from out of town, Max Fuentes, who is a city judge in San Antonio now. He got everybody to meet together, these people that hated me, literally, to meet with me, and this group. To sit down and mediate, like you do in mediation. And this guy who was instigating everything, was the other judge. He kept asking me questions, "Why don't you like him?" "What do you mean? I like him." "But you work with him?" "Yeah, I'll work with him" "Well, what is this?"

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“I don’t know. As far as I’m concerned, look, we can work together, okay.”

“Okay, well can I ask here, some questions?” I said, “Yeah, sure.” “Well, why don’t you like me?” That’s the guy and he, “See there. See there.” I’m literally, “See there. See there.” And then some of his friends said, “Wait a minute, wait a minute. No, no, you don’t ask him.” “Wait a minute, I answered all your questions, I answered all your questions. Let me ask him, don’t interrupt. “Why were you working against me?” They said, “No, no, no” and everybody would jump up. There were just about five or six guys there. [] I said, “Look, let him answer.” “Well.” “Let him answer.” “No, no, no, no,” and they wouldn’t let him answer. They were defending him. I said, “Well, okay, let me ask you this. I know if I tell you something, you’re not going to believe me.” Well, they kind of chuckled. They were the opposite, you know. I said, “But, what if one of you guys that are sitting here, one of you guys tells you, would you believe him?” “Yeah, of course. One of our guys, sure.” They’re strong PASSO, you know. I said, “Okay then, remember that, you said it. And if one of your guys tells you that he was undermining, talking against me, you’re going to accept it?” “Yeah, of course, we’re standing strong, you know.” I said, “Okay.” Dario, see Dario was one of them. He’d gotten to know me, okay, because being one of them and not liking me, I hired him. He was my clerk, okay. And I let him see how I worked, and I’d keep him close. Dario, do this. I’m going to do this, and he’d see, and he got to know me, okay. And that’s what they said and that’s what they thought. He got to know me, I didn’t try to convince him of anything. I just said, “Hey.” He’d can listen to my calls, listen to my conversations, the people I talk to, what I did, and

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he got to be very close to me. And he turned, he turned around and told them, this guy that was playing [], and Dario says, “You’re a lying SOB. Because, you know, I was at that meeting, and you, and you, and you” to the rest of them, “You were there too. You know what he did.” And you know, he said this and said that, and so forth.” I didn’t say a word. Then they caved in. “Oh well...” It’s their own people, okay. And this guy he just shut-up. So, everybody got up, said, “Okay, fine. We are going to be friends from now on.” It worked, it worked. Everybody left except that one guy and Max, because it was his apartment, and myself. And you know me, right before I left, I said, “Okay, remember, you said we are going to work together. Give me your hand,” and he wouldn’t give me his hand. “Give me your hand, you just told me you were.” He said, “No, no, no, no you,” but Max was there to witness it. So yeah, there’s going to be people that are not going to work. You have to work through them. You can’t let them dictate or get away with that. Because there is a lot of good people out there on both sides. Well, you know, I’m not, I’m talking to the choir right here, you know. What people think is one thing. What people know is another and I’m blessed to know these people, you know. So, you just work around them.

NG: Do you, so even the people that don’t get along, Fiestas Patrias is an opportunity to for them all to work together?

AR: Oh, absolutely. They want to participate. Even remember, I mentioned Gregory Salazar at MAYO. They, they were hell raisers then, and we knew they wanted to mess up the parade. We knew you know, and we could have had the police detain them because we knew, but what we did was let the parade go through, okay. By

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the time they wanted to come in. They came in on the tail end and we let them. They had a big bus, oh MAYO this, that, and. That big bus, they went on at the end of the parade, right on through the end of the parade. Everybody thought that they were part of the parade. So again, they were in, they had their say, and everybody thought “Hey, hey, how about that.” After that we got to talking to them and, you know again, I reasoned with them, Gregory Salazar was a very intelligent young man, but he was fierce. A lot of people are. You know, they believe in what they believe in. You can’t say that they’re wrong. They may have a different approach than you might not condone, but they are trying to do, like the “Pachucos” if you remember, I said back there, defending their community, their families, and these guys were clean cut. I don’t know if you really know what Pachuco was like. They had they finest crease on their pants, they were clean, they were real neat, great looking shoes and everything. Not like people depict them as marijuanos or drug addicts. You know when they got into the drugs? After they came from the war. They went to war, they came back, and there were a lot of problems, but no it’s, the reality is something else.

NG: There are a lot of political decisions and coalitions and organizations working together to make political decisions. What do you think it means for regular, everyday people? Because there are still conflicts and disagreements with for example, between the black and Hispanic community, so.

AR: Not as many as people think. We work very closely with the black community, very closely. There’s still individuals that don’t work with them. There’s still individuals that don’t work with us, but that’s in every community. That’s the

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thing that people don't understand. Many times you know, I had a friend sit here and tell me, he says, "Well, yeah you know, Hispanics are great friends of mine. They are good people. The only thing is that, on Friday night, they go out and get drunk and they come home and beat up their wives, and you know." I was just sitting here and I said, "Well, you're right. You're right that does happen with some of them, okay, not all of them.

[End of Tape #1]

Well, they said Hispanics get drunk on Friday nights and come home and beat up their wives and so forth. I said, "Well, some of them." I said, "But there are some in the black community who do the same thing. You know they get drunk Friday night, they come home, they beat up their wives, true?" "Yeah, that's right, but the Hispanics..." I said, "No, no, no, no, there's no but. There are some blacks that do the same thing. As a matter of fact, there are some Anglos that come home, or go out and get drunk Friday night, they come home, and they beat up their wives." "Well, yeah that's true, but the Hispanics."

"No, what I want you to understand, there's no difference. There's some in every group that act that way, not just, not the Hispanics. Some in every, there's some Chinese that get drunk Friday night. They come home and beat up their wives. There's no difference." "Well, yeah, you know, I understand that, but the Hispanics." I said, "No, no, there's not but. There's not but, okay. Everybody is the same." It's like Kennedy said, you know, "Citizen of the world, everywhere, Argentina, France, you got the same problems." These are just people. They are people problems. I call them people problems, you know. But they say, "Oh, the

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Hispanic,” no, no, that’s what you have to understand or get out of your mind. It’s people. They have the same thing. If there is a problem, you deal with it. It’s not just a Hispanic problem, it’s black, Anglo, whatever. It’s a problem. It’s a people problem. And don’t give me this, “Yeah, but the Hispanics.” I mean, sure, they are used to thinking that way, you know, but you got to get it, first of all, we have to realize that because that many of our people, as I said before, think that we are that way, or we’re second class, or that, no, no, no, and out of our people’s heads. When I have, and I have a lot of truancy cases and when I try to instill for them is to find out what the problem is, and resolve it. And it works. People say, “How do you do it?” I get calls from California, New York, and everything, “How do you deal with these kids?” Kids that have missed fifty days of the semester. After they come to court they have perfect attendance. “How do you do it?” If you tell them, “Well, I do the same thing.” So, you know but it’s a beautiful, beautiful, people are just, are good. You just have to understand them, and then it works.

NG: Do you think that these big decisions that are made in mediations that they, that everyday people who aren’t a part of it, that it affects them?

AR: Oh, no doubt, no doubt. Politics affects everybody, okay, but the thing is that not everybody wants to participate. I mean, they have, their busy, or something, making a living, and I understand that, and so they don’t participate. But if they would, they’d see there’s a lot of vacuum there. That’s what I’ve found out. Coming in as one of the new Hispanics in there, I said, “Man, there’s a lot of positions there that need somebody, not just the Hispanics, that need somebody.” Right now, there are precinct judges, okay, in this coming election, that are not

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filled. A precinct judge is a very, very important position. If not filled they have to go and look for people to fill them in, from other areas, because people think, "Oh, precinct judge, what's that? You know, I don't want to take my time" or so forth. And, again, I don't, I try to not put blame as much as find out what's happening and how can it be resolved. I remember in a meeting with Mayor Welch, as a matter of fact, and that HCCAA, there were about thirty- two or people sitting around, or something like that, and they said, "Okay, let's start from here and they put down the problems, start putting down problems." They'd start reciting the problems, the same one, you know. This, that, the same ones, when it got to me I said, "You know, what are we doing? Everybody knows what the problems are. We don't have to go write them down. Everybody knows what the problems are. What we need are some answers. Let's start putting down some answers" you know, and they'd say, "Oh you know that's right." Well, everybody is writing the same thing. They need money, they want this, they want this. You know what the problems are - Some solutions. And those only come like they say happiness. You know, when they say that when you're happy, that you're only going to be happy for a short period of time, okay, and you have to be happy all over again, get something else to make you happy because it diminishes, it goes away. It's the same way. If you have a solution, its going to, only going to work for so long because people are, people are people, you know, so you have to continue to like I said, "Prime the pump" and keep resolving, and keep resolving, and get the. Now, once they start seeing some effects and everything, they'll, some will continue, some won't. But, at least you are moving in the right

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direction and that's the long-term thing.

NG: I want to talk a little more about Fiestas Patrias.

AR: Okay.

NG: What is, what is your role in it now?

AR: Adviser.

NG: Adviser?

AR: Yes, you might say, a problem solver. I hardly hear about anything and it's people are set in what they do. They know what to do. Unless there's a problem, I don't hear about it. I know what's going to happen. I'll just check with them just to keep up and go from there.

NG: I was told that your wife is involved also?

AR: Sure, sure.

NG: What is her name?

AR: Rita.

NG: Rita. And what does she do with Fiestas Patrias?

AR: Right now, very little. She was at one time, heading the organization, you know, but just, well, it evolves – different people and so forth.

NG: So, in the beginning, what did it entail to get, to get all of this started?

AR: Well, just a matter of contacting the right people, getting all the necessary approvals, you know, from government, the county judge, the mayor, the state reps, and then inviting, it was more a personal invitation than anything. Knowing the state reps themselves, and the governor, again John Castillo brought the governor, we brought, of course we'd bring some, like we brought Vicki Carr, to

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come and they said, "Oh, wow. You're having a party with Vicki Carr? Everybody's is going to be there." You know, people, they're going to be there. And so, it's like putting a party together, and once they see, it's like getting a successful party, they'll want to do it again. So each year we did that. The Mexican government, as a matter of fact, has of course, officially, the Grito the fourteenth, sixteenth, or fifteenth of September, Diez y Seis de Septiembre. And when we had the first year, the Mexican government, it was the first year or the second year, the governor then left the position. He didn't want to participate and he didn't invite somebody from Mexico. You know, well, again remember, we have all of the powerful people here. He said, "Well, just communicate with the president of Mexico," and they cooperated very well. They sent somebody with, higher up in the government to participate, you know. Well, they had a government official coming from the president of Mexico, all the Mexican officials here started jumping too, you know, they, tourism, and everybody so, and they said, "They're coming? Who invited them? Who brought them?" "Well, we did." But they started jumping us to get in line. We had that participation with the Grito. They didn't do it, we did it. It wasn't going to be, but we still gave the Mexican governor and the Consulado their place because that is their place. They're the official representatives of Mexico, okay. Three years after that they called me, the head of Fiestas Patrias and Johnny Mata, and other people involved to a meeting and they said, "What's this about?" "You know, just come to the meeting." You'll see a Mexican, the Mexican Consulate said, "Well, we are going to have an organization, all the Mexican organizations, and we are going to have a

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parade and we're going to have a festival, we're going to have this." And we said, "Well, wait a minute. That's what we're doing." They said, "Well, no, no, no, no, it's not the same thing, not the same thing. We're going to..." The same thing we were doing. I said, "No, your doing the same thing that we're doing and that's alright. You're welcome to do it", okay. I said, "But, don't try to take our sponsors, people that participate, and we won't say anything about it. If you do, the only thing we're going to do is, we are going to go to the media and let them know that you're doing that, okay, and we're doing this. They said, "Oh, no, no, no, but, let me tell you," this is the Consulado, "I have to, we have to do it because we've got orders from the president of Mexico that we need to be heading this activity." And it was Johnny Mata that spoke up. He said, "Yeah, but we don't take orders from the president of Mexico. We're American citizens." And sure enough, they had their function and the only thing we did, we let people know this is Fiestas Patrias, that's the Mexican Consulate over there. Well, that didn't last very long. They died away. The only thing they had is the Grito and we would bring the artistas and we brought Cantinflas. The time they had the earthquake in Mexico City, he was supposed to come, but he couldn't because of the earthquake. So, the following year, he came, and he was here in our function, but we always gave the Mexican government their place. That's why they say Diez y Seis de Septiembre, no, it's Fiestas Patrias. Diez y Seis de Septiembre is a one day Mexican celebration. Fiestas Patrias is international. Everybody is welcome. And even now, you know what the highlight of the function, of course, they bring in artistas and everything so, but the one that brings in the grupo they

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call it a militar revolucionarios, we do. Every year, about sixty students from this school come in and bring La Banda militar, and they build a theater while they are having other functions. We take them over there so they can have the official, and we're the ones that do the official, but the Mexican government together, okay. And just last week, I saw one of the members of the militar patriotico and he was saying, "Oh, man that's the best thing we have" because they are proud. I don't know if you've ever been to the Miller Theater on that celebration, but it works, it works, and at one time, as a matter of fact, we had, we had our people, that want to do festivities at Fiestas Patrias and everything and Johnny one time said, "Well, we better put a stop to it." I said, "No, let them, let them. The whole idea is we want them to honor the Hispanic community and if they're having a function in that name," now they even advertise, they sell cars, they sell everything. Fiestas Patrias is a sale, man. Do it, you know, but giving us some recognition. That's the thing that we want. "So that why? What was the object in the first place?" It put us up there. Now with everybody else.

NG: Was it controversial to start letting other groups participate, like non-Mexicans?

AR: No. The only controversy we had one time was we were kind of, really kind of on pins and needles, when we brought the ballet from Mexico City. Not the Ballet Folklorico, we do that all the time. The ballet, the guys with the skinny tights on and everything, we said, "Man, what's our community going to do there?" you know. So we kind of sweated that out. But no, they presented the ballet and everybody behaved themselves, and everybody was, had a wonderful time. God, it was great. Everything went, it was wonderful.

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NG: So it's become very international, the Fiestas Patrias?

AR: It is.

NG: And are other, other countries' governments involved in the same way Mexico is?

AR: Well, several. Not all of them, but several at different times, you know participate.

NG: What do you think that festival means to the Houston Community now, or what has it meant?

AR: Well, they say it's a, you know, it's a significant and a, we'd like to think so, and people enjoy it, you know and whenever they think of it, it's a positive thing you know, and so that's, that was our objective, that everyone want to participate, that everyone feel, like the when Mayor Welch said, excuse me, many years ago in September, everybody is a Mexicano. We brought the Grupos Jarochos from Veracruz. They're still here, some of the members are playing. Mariachis, now there's mariachis all over the place. We didn't use to have mariachis, you know, now it's, which is great. They say that this is like "Little Mexico." Well, yeah that's fine. What's wrong with that? You go all over and they have different groups of mariachis playing, and they have established themselves as, as an important resource, you know, for them income. Musicians, as a matter of fact I've been, my father was a musician and my grandfather used to play the harp as well. That's where I was getting the name for, Villareal. And my dad taught all of us to play, so since we were kids, we played. One of my brothers has a master's in music and he's taught in our schools, in Edison and in Davis, and it was tough for him to get in there because they didn't want them. See now, there's always the limitation. When he was at Edison, you know, they wouldn't let them participate

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in contests, but he would take them anyway, on his own and went to the San Antonio Parade, went to many other areas, and when his principle saw that, they would try to chastise them, you know. But it was such a popular thing, they won, and they won from here. Whoever heard of Edison Junior High competing against high school bands, but they'd win, they won. They'd do different concerts and all that. And then Jeff Davis, musically, McNeely was the teacher there. He taught my brothers, and he taught us, and we started a dance band there. We went in competition at Sam Houston State, won that, went to North Texas State, which is the number one jazz school, and we won there. They offered everybody scholarships. Some of them took them and some of them didn't, but those musicians are still playing out there. Most of the musicians, or many of the musicians that are playing now were taught by my brother. Now remember, remember fiesta, everybody, the bands, as a matter of fact, I was thinking about the bands there were then. This was a union where everybody would come. Everybody goes to the dances so you got to know everybody. And my dad was a musician. I said he had the first band that helped Guadalupe Church. So my parents helped them establish that. From then on, right after that we've been involved. When I was five years old I was singing and learning to play the clarinet along with my other studies and everything, and at the University of Houston we traveled there with the music band. Now, like I told you what we are doing there with the seniors and it's just something, music is something that everybody relates to. From the old songs, as a matter of fact, a lot of the old songs are being re-recorded so it's good beans. You get to know everybody.

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NG: Did you want to mention some of the bands, I don't know if you had them written down that...

AR: Oh, well, sure.

NG: That had participated?

AR: Let's see, Roy Salas and the Rhythm Kings for instance. Lydia Mendoza, she's from here, has a museum for her. Jesse Rodriguez, of course, and my father, and my brothers, Roberto Compean, Eloy Perez, Neto Perez, these are all people that did well.

NG: Are those all Houston?

AR: Yes.

NG: Bands?

AR: Luis Gasca was a player here Sam Gasca, Luis Valdez. Luis Valdez still plays with the big bands in California. He comes in every once in a while and of course, we always get together, but that's a whole other story. I've got pictures, my brother has pictures of some of these bands, but again, like you hardly, they are never mentioned because we had mentioned some of the higher profiles, but these are the people that made this community what it is.

NG: I was going to ask you something about the, oh, Fiestas Patrias, it consists of the parade and what else?

AR: Well, now it has, we used to have a festival, okay, but then, again, we started and like the radio stations then started doing their own festival. We said, "Well, why duplicate that?" Now they do a free festival. Radio stations do festivals and so what we do is the parade and beauty pageant, actually, it's four beauty pageants, I

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believe, and a different, you know, we started with one, Senorita Fiestas Patrias, okay. That was very difficult because the Hispanic communities, their parents don't like to have their daughters, you know, in bathing suits parading around in front of people, but again, we always assured the parents they could be there, and they practiced, and really what we started out as, well we started because we wanted to teach them, and there's lessons how to sit, how to walk, how to talk. We even at one time got a dentist to clean their teeth, you know, things that would benefit them. When the parents saw this, and there is no funny business, you know, and they can't be married and they abide by, you know, these rules and then, of course, we started the junior miss because we had different age groups, and then there is the little miss. So now, there is a little miss, the pre-teen, the junior miss, and the Ms. Fiestas Patrias. And, all of them have a talent competition. So, they all have to learn if they don't have a talent, learn a talent, which is good for them too, and they all speak Spanish. If they don't before, they do then. So, all these things are things that they learn or benefit from there and go from there.

NG: Other than getting the community together, why was it important for you to begin this particular celebration?

AR: Other than?

NG: Yes.

AR: Well, that's the basis for everything else, okay, because everything else is done individually, in groups, or whatever and the whole possibility of it is doing it together, or just getting to know each other, see. So, yeah other than that, I guess

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it wouldn't be important because you have festivals everyday, you have parties everyday, you have gatherings everyday. The Chamber has meetings and different political groups always have forums and education, and then to teach, and so forth, but in most of these they don't reach the people that are reached by doing this, because now even in the paper, they say, you know, "This is a family oriented, you can go there and take your kids." There is no drinking, no fighting, no violence, you know, everybody is respectful and that's a big, big, important, you know, plus. But, I don't want to criticize anybody, but you see other functions that you wouldn't take you kid because there might be some outbreak, or something like this, and so forth. Thank goodness everything has gone well, you know, and but that's because, again, it's people look at it theirs, okay. You don't go to somebody else's, you go to yours, your going, your Fiestas Patrias, this is about you. You make it what it is or what it's not. If you decide you are not going to have something this time, you don't. You know, so it's flexible, it's a basic thing. I don't know if you've been to a Fiestas Patrias parade here, but it's a mass of people and everybody participates. They don't get upset, but yeah we have people working together, coordinating everything. They'll wait, they'll work, if you need help, they'll help you, you need something, they'll help. They all get, it's a good spirit, you know, and so you know just getting together is the key. You see, everybody wanting to come together.

NG: Well, we talked about a lot of things. Is there anything?

AR: Yes, nothing that I planned.

NG: Sorry, is there anything that you wanted to talk about that we haven't discussed? I

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don't know if you still have time, we can continue talking.

AR: Oh, yeah, sure, sure, sure. Let's see. Well, as far as the history of the community here, you know, I look it as a history of the city itself because many times I know the people that are involved in doing things and they're not the ones that are recognized, okay, and I would like if nothing more than to be able to get some of these people and get their visibility. As a matter of fact, one of the things that we do, you mentioned about Fiestas Patrias, we have a recipient of the Distinguished Hispanic American Award, okay. And that's just one person. That itself has a history in itself. When we started, we said, "Oh, let's recognize a," they have a Man of the Year at LULAC, they have Man of the Year that they honor now, the city honors different people, and so forth. So, we said, "Well, we want one person be recognized and has contributed," you know, and even that became controversial because they wanted one for a man, and one for a woman, okay. They had a selection of it. I guess there were too many men and then some women and what, Olga Solis was one of them. They said, "Well, wait a minute. Wait a minute," you know. "With that person that was selected there, you know, we didn't like this." Well, okay, you chair the next committee. Put it on the group to make the selection. So she found out, because most of the time they'll say there is some bias or this type of thing. How do you meet with the community? We stay away from it. Then she came back and she's the one that, again was one of the biggest, "Hey, no, no, man, this is the honor of the Distinguished Hispanic American Recipient." So far, everyone that has been selected, people have not questioned, accepted. So, that's another thing that we do. And again, it's just, I

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just, I'm standing back and watching and there might be other things that we've been doing that I've forgotten about, but that's an important one. We have a breakfast for Fiestas Patrias, you know, where we again, it's a very also, something that people wants to go to and what we would do at that breakfast, many years back, is present politically, the most, I guess, the most, the hottest contest participant, whether it be mayor, or governor, or state rep, or something. It was something was then, that they would, that person would get a chance to talk to a group that he would not, would never be able to reach otherwise. See, that's another purpose of getting these diverse people together. You're not going to get them for anybody else, you know, so that's just.

NG: Are the things open to the public?

AR: Oh yeah, of course, of course, they're welcome.

NG: Who, can you give me an example of some people who were given the Distinguished?

AR: Oh, yes, Johnny Castillo, and I have a list of them here, but I was the first one, the committee selected me, okay. Johnny Mata has been one, Ben Reyes, off of the top of my head Ninfa Lorenzo, some known, some not known, a father, and about what was his name? He was a bishop that was here, well, again, now it's since '69 it's been, well, one a year, so it's a long list.

NG: Is that associated with Fiestas Patrias?

AR: Yeah, oh yeah, yeah. Right, that's our creation. And that's what we say, in the controversy was man or woman, and we said, "No, there is going to be one, whether it's a man or a woman. The one." And it's worked out better that way. If

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you water it down and say, "Okay, the best man, the best woman," come on.

We've been blessed that it's worked out, in that way.

NG: So you said that there were some things that you had prepared for, that we didn't talk about

AR: Oh, we've covered it.

NG: Okay.

AR: We've covered most of them, I just wanted to not to forget. You asked about the bands like Eloy Perez, Chabelo Tovar one young man that was very, very successful here, was Neto Perez, and he started out and established himself, and he died young, you know, but still did something, some good there. There are a lot of individuals in the neighborhood that have been left out necessarily, but I didn't get really worked toward getting all of these names, just a few of the key ones.

NG: Okay, well I think we're done.

AR: Well, I really appreciate the opportunity to have my say in this. I hope it's helped.

NG: Thank you.