

5-14-2010

## **Interview no. 1479**

Robert Navarro

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Interview with Robert Navarro by Edmundo Valencia, 2010, "Interview no. 1479," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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University of Texas at El Paso

Institute of Oral History

Interviewee: Robert Navarro

Interviewer: Edmundo Valencia

Project: Paso del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: 14 May 2010

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Transcript No.: 1479

Transcriber: GMR Transcription Services

**Biographical Synopsis of Interviewee:** Robert Navarro was born in El Paso, Texas on March 30, 1939. His parents were Robert Navarro and Lidia Navarro. The elder Navarro was a contractor and his wife was a stay at home mother for Robert and his sister, Lidia. Robert attended Morehead Elementary School, El Paso High School and is a graduate of Texas Western College in El Paso, Texas and New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Robert served in the United States Army and is a recipient of the Army Commendation Medal. Robert is married to Merle, with three daughters Laura, Jennifer and Sara, three grandchildren

**Summary of Interview:** Robert Navarro was born and raised in El Paso, Texas and attended school in El Paso. After Robert graduated from high school, he attended Texas Western College in El Paso, Texas and graduated in 1961 with a B.S. in Civil Engineering. He entered the United States Army via the ROTC program for two years. After the Army, Robert attended New Mexico State University and received his Masters in Structural Engineering. During his time as a graduate student, Robert worked for A.B. Peinado and Sons. After graduating, he continued to work for that company. A.B. Peinado and Sons got into land development and Robert saw his opportunity to buy their engineering firm. After the acquisition, the name of the firm changed several times until Robert had 100% ownership in 1980 then the name permanently became Robert Navarro and Associates Incorporated. Robert's firm is primarily a structural engineering firm and the firm has done work for various agencies and places such as the state government, federal government, El Paso Water Utilities, Army Core of Engineers, Hunt Building Corporation, the Navy, Texas Tech, the prison bureau and the United States Embassy in La Paz, Bolivia. In addition, Robert served as the Chairman of The Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce, and is also a part of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in El Paso, Texas. He has also been a part of the Lion's Club and the Rotary Club of El Paso, Texas. Robert has served on many boards such as the State Board of Licensing for Engineering, Consulting Engineers Organization Group, he was president of the State Organization, served ASAE, became vice-president of the State Organization, founded local chapters of the Structural Engineers

Association of Texas and was president of that association, founded a local chapter of Consulting Engineers, and he helped establish the American Concrete Institute Chapter in El Paso. Robert is also a part of a relatively unknown organization called Paso del Norte in El Paso, Texas that is working towards revitalizing downtown El Paso. Robert's advice for others seeking entrepreneurship is to go out and compete, use all of one's resources, be straight forward, honest, communicate, establish a network you'll always use, and don't create enemies.

**Length of interview:** 60 minutes

**Length of Transcript:** 23 pages

Name of Interviewee: Robert Navarro  
Date of Interview: 14 May 2010  
Name of Interviewer: Edmundo Valencia

This is an interview with Robert Navarro on May 14, 2010, in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Edmundo Valencia. This interview is a part of the Paso del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project.

EV: Where and when were you born?

RN: I was born in El Paso—March 30, 1939.

EV: Who are your parents?

RN: Robert Navarro and Lidia Navarro.

EV: What were their occupations?

RN: My father was a contractor. He worked on remodeling, primarily and my mother was a housewife, brought up two children, my sister and I.

EV: Please tell me about your education.

RN: Okay. I went to elementary school here in El Paso, at Morehead School. That's when it was still on Arizona Street. That no longer exists, and then I went to El Paso High. I started in the eighth grade. From El Paso High I enrolled immediately, the next semester, at Texas Western College and graduated from Texas Western College in 1961. I earned a BS in Civil Engineering and then went into the Army through the ROTC program for two years, and actually got out of the Army about forty-five days early in what they called an early release program so that I could get started at a semester to obtain my master's degree at New Mexico State University, and so I went to New Mexico State University for about a year-and-a-half, while I was working on my master's, and I also served as a assistant professor in their program, so that I could help with the finances.

Actually, it was an assistant, I don't think I was an assistant professor, just an assistant.

EV: Let's go back again. What do you remember about your parents?

RN: Nice response in my mind. We were a very loving family and they provided me with everything I needed. They did not have any wealth, but we had a very loving home life, and so I was very grateful for them.

EV: You have brothers and sisters?

RN: A sister.

EV: One sister?

RN: Younger, a couple years younger.

EV: What is her name?

RN: Lidia.

EV: Lidia?

RN: Also like my mother.

EV: Your father was a contractor, so—because the next question is did your family operate a business? He worked for himself?

RN: Yes.

EV: Can you tell me more about what he did?

RN: Well, he had a very small contracting business. He really hired only, like, two people, one person, sometimes more as he got projects, and most of his projects were remodeling, additions, garage additions, apartment additions, but that was his primary work. During the last several years that he worked, he had been a jeweler and in his early life he worked at Armor Meats, working at the bottom, cutting [and] transporting meat, that sort of thing.

EV: You always lived in El Paso?

RN: Yes.

EV: In what area did you live?

RN: We lived in the central area on Oregon Street, and I would say it is about six, seven blocks north of the downtown, so it was really central downtown, and we moved there when I was very small, so I grew up there, and my parents stayed there until I moved out of the house and went into the Army, really.

EV: As a child, do you recall your earliest jobs?

RN: Oh gosh, I used to work with my father when I was very small. He would take me with him, and so I started learning about construction at a very early age, and then when I got into high school, I played football, so our coach would get us jobs in the summer, and I ended up working several places, but mostly as a laborer, because that's what he wanted us to do to, kinda, stay in shape during the summer. So that was my early work experience, and then while in college I worked part-time with a firm—in an engineering firm. Really at the end of the college period, after I had taken several courses, so I could help in the engineering.

EV: When you worked with your father, what do you think you learned from working with him?

RN: That's a good question. I feel like one of the reasons that I like structures is I have a good visualization in my mind of how things go together, and it may be that I absorbed that when I first starting working as a very young child, probably eight or nine, intuitively without even knowing, just watching the way something went together, in my mind, I guess, I started visualizing structures in three dimensions, and it turns out to be that is a very critical ability for a structural engineer. We've had structural engineers that had a lot of education but never developed that ability to really visualize the structure, so that they could develop in their minds what the systems would be, how forces would travel through the structure, how you would have to design. But I suppose that, and the work ethic, the fact that going to work was not something that was not to be liked, I think instilled in me the idea that work is fine, it's something you do and it's something you should do, but it's good, so I had no aversion to work.

EV: His work ethic, what did it consist of?

RN: I think one of the things I learned is do the best you can, be honest with your labor, be honest in your communications with people, do what you say you're gonna do. I think my father instilled that without particularly trying to teach it. I just saw him do it, so I learned that was the right thing to do.

EV: What can you tell me about your mother?

RN: My mother was very loving. She brought up the two children, was very protective, was a happy person as well, so she instilled happiness in the home environment. She was very involved with the children. She was in the PTA. She was interacting with the schools while we were going to school. I learned

Spanish as a first language and did not learn English until I was in the first grade, but then I learned English when I first started Morehead.

EV: What was the language spoken at home?

RN: Spanish. Spanish from the time I was born until I started going to school, and then we still spoke Spanish, but my mother would try to speak English to us so that we would learn it, and try to learn the right pronunciation, and the right usage, however Spanish became, and stayed, our primary language at home until I left for school.

EV: What was expected of you, as far as going to school, from your parents?

RN: My parents wanted me to do well, but in their idea, the idea of—the concept of me going into something like what my father did was pretty much what we talked about. The idea of going on to further education after high school was nice, but it just wasn't something that anybody in my family had done, so it wasn't something that was considered. I guess, feasible, until I started getting older, and started expressing a desire to maybe go on, and they encouraged me.

EV: Was there anybody else besides them that encouraged you? How did you feel that you wanted to do that?

RN: I think once I got into high school and the environment around me where I saw other kids, and I saw I was able to do the same things, the idea that I could go onto college became more second nature, yeah, a possibility, so I think I'll consider it, but it wasn't until the last couple years that I really gave it some serious thought, but initially I thought I'd be a carpenter or cabinet maker, or something—build with my hands, or contracting.

EV: Were there any other figures around that time that served as role models to you?



RN: The only person I can think of, because I was involved in sports, is a young man that started coaching a group of us that were in school at a very early age, I would say nine or ten, so once I got started, there was a program through the YMCA, but once I got started I remained active, very active in sports the whole year, primarily the school year, starting in elementary school, and then I played sports in high school. When I left high school I did not continue with school sports, but I still liked sports, and then in later years I started playing tennis. I played tennis for a lot of years, and then the last several years, I still exercise three times a week. It's something I do whether I feel like it or not, I just think it's important for your health and your mind, too. It's an ability to just, kinda, work out whatever your frustration is.

EV: Once you were in college, or how did you decide to go into your career?

RN: I hadn't decided to go into engineering until probably the last year. I did well in math, I liked the idea of building because I had gotten that from my father, and I liked the idea of putting together structures, and designing, and so I guess that kinda evolved as a basis for going into engineering, and I stayed in the engineering. The first year I did okay in a couple of courses, and didn't do so well in a couple of others, and I was a little discouraged, but then after that I started finding it easier, and really the last two years, I enjoyed the college years, I think I learned a lot, but having gotten involved with the ROTC, that became the next phase in my life, so as soon as I graduated I went into the Army for two years.

EV: Would you talk more about that please?

RN: While I was in the Army I was—when I graduated with an engineering degree. They give you five choices in which branch that you want to serve, so of course my first choice was a core of engineers, my second choice was ordinance where

they have the ability to work on equipment, my third choice was, I believe, was transportation, the fourth choice was artillery. I don't know, I had five choices. I can't remember all of them, but when I graduated, there was a critical shortage of armor officers, so I ended up being in the armor core. I was assigned to Fort Hood, to a combat tank company. I was assigned a platoon leader. During the time I was there, I was promoted to first lieutenant—as a second lieutenant. I was promoted to first lieutenant, then I became a company commander of a tank company. During that period, we had an exercise where the whole division from Fort Hood was flown to Germany on an exercise. It was a full combat exercise, so we landed in Germany and, there was a whole division of tanks and equipment, there, already. It's been there for years. So we took that equipment, and started a two-week field exercise, so we were in the field for two weeks, and it was a good learning experience. After the two weeks, I came back. It was toward the end of the time my two years were coming up. During that time I got the Army Commendation Medal. It's an award. I was asked to stay in, and instead of being a reserve officer, core officer, to go into the regular Army, and I considered it, because I enjoyed that period, but I really wanted to get back to engineering, so I decided I wanted to get a master's degree and that's when I left early, and came back here. There wasn't a master's degree program in structures at Texas Western, so I went to New Mexico State University, in Las Cruces, so I commuted every day, but still lived here.

EV: What year was this?

RN: I came back in 1963. I graduated in 1961 from Texas Western, came back in 1963, and I went to school in '63, '64, and during that time I worked part-time for a small engineering firm, and then went to work for them after I graduated with my master's degree—after I completed my master's degree.

EV: What was your master's, sorry?

RN: When?

EV: In what was your master's?

RN: It was in structural engineering. They had a structural program at New Mexico State, so I concentrated on the structural engineering. At that point I knew that's what I wanted to do.

EV: What was the name of the company where you started working part-time?

RN: It was A.B. Peinado and Sons, and when I started with the company they had just started the company. It was two men, Arnold Peinado and Robert Peinado. I noticed Arnold was in here, so he's gone through this same program. But during that period, I worked with the firm. When I started working with them, they were working out of Arnold's garage. That's where their office was. It was a very small operation, and then we moved out of there to some offices, and then moved again to another office. During that period, I received my professional licensing from New Mexico State, and from Texas, and also during that period, Robert and Arnold decided they wanted to get into land development, so we got into a project together, which evolved into a good project, but it was also the basis for me to buy them out because they wanted to continue with the land development, and I wanted to continue with the engineering, so I bought the firm, and then the firm went through a couple of changes. It was Peinado, Peinado and Navarro, and then it became Navarro and Peinado, and then when I bought it out the 100 percent, it was Robert Navarro and Associates, and that was in 1980.

EV: Let me go back a little bit to your education. At New Mexico, how was that experience in the master's program?

RN: Very good. They had a very good structural program, very excellent professors. By working as an assistant in their labs, I was able to, I guess, gain more

experience, and the opportunity to talk to not only to the professors but the other students who were taking courses, and answering their questions, which led to my thinking more about what they were asking about, and I think it was part of the education process that was helpful. Actually working as an assistant, because when you get the questions directly to yourself, I think it makes you look it up, and think about it more than when you hear somebody ask somebody else a question, and you knew the answer. So I think it was a good experience. I would commute, so I would leave in the morning, whether I had classes or not. I had an office there, and I would spend the whole day there, and then I would come back in the afternoon. I would do homework, or go to the assistant teaching assignments, or go to class. To me, it was like a job. I had already been in the Army for two years, this was just another job, and I knew I wanted to get the master's to be able to get into this particular part of engineering, and in fact, now we typically don't hire a bachelor's degree individual who wants to do structures, because it's just not enough. It really takes a master's, at least a master's. But like I said, it also takes, kind of, an ability beyond this mastering engineering courses or mathematics. It takes that ability to visualize how something goes together, where the stresses might be physically, visualizing in space. We've had young people with a bachelor's (doctor's??) degree, had excellent mathematical skills, but they couldn't master the engineering visualization, and so they were really perfect for research or teaching, but they found, and we did too, that structural engineering and design was not their mainstay.

EV: So you think it is something that cannot be learned?

RN: It's very difficult to learn. I think what I have found over the years is that it is an intuition type process, that unless an individual has it, and these individuals were very smart by the way. It wasn't that they didn't have the intelligence. They just didn't have the intuition to visualize and develop a structure in their mind. Before you can design it, you have to analyze it, and before you can analyze it, you have to visualize the structure, where the forces are gonna go, because when you

finally apply the formulas and the numbers, you should already know what the answers are gonna be more or less. If you rely on the formulas and numbers for the magic to come out after you finish doing the numbers, you can't really visualize a structure. I've learned that over the years with several people, and my colleagues say the same thing. It's not something that I have thought about, and it's my own thought. They all say the same thing. Most structural engineering firms will not even interview somebody without a master's degree in structures because they found that it just takes too much training to get the bachelor's individual up to the point where they are productive.

EV: What do you think you learned working from A.B. Peinado and Sons and seeing the start up phase of the business?

RN: It also turned out to be fortunate because I learned not only the engineering side, but because, even though I wasn't involved in the process, it was such a small area, that I learned about submitting proposals with your qualifications, about how to make presentations for proposals, about how to call on clients, because you could hear everything that was going on, about how to send bills, the business side of things, about what was expected from, say Government agencies for licensing, and for doing business in the El Paso community, for instance. I learned who the firms were that had architectural capabilities, so I learned to communicate with these people, how to submit proposals, and so on—how to negotiate. Partly, in the beginning, because I was just (here and?? hearing??), I would be involved in the process to some extent.

EV: How did you decide to go into business for yourself?

RN: I guess, very early on I could see other young men developing businesses, or going into business or becoming partners, so I started thinking about it very early. I started indicating that to Arnold and Robert, so they knew that that was something that was one of my goals, so I initially became a partner with them, as I

said, by the names, and then eventually, since they were interested in land development, it was convenient for them to just sell the company to me.

EV: What is the present name of your company?

RN: Robert Navarro and Associates, Incorporated.

EV: Would you please describe your business, number of employees, and services?

RN: We are a structural engineering firm, primarily. By that, we typically do the design and then prepare the construction documents for the structural portions of facilities, and I say facilities because it includes buildings, bridges, towers, water treatment plants, sewer treatment plants, warehouses, and schools. We've done a lot of, a lot of work. If you look at that one little brochure, at the back, it has a list of our clients, so we have done work for the school districts—

EV: Yeah, there's over thirty or over forty.

RN: Yeah. We've done work with State Government, Federal Government, Army Core of Engineers, the Navy, the prison bureau. We did the design of a US Embassy in La Paz, Bolivia, so we've had quite a variety of clients, and what we do primarily, we do some civil engineering, because I am registered as a civil, but generally only when it pertains to our project, and so we design or retrofit if they have a problem with a structure. We go in and investigate to find out what the problem is, and then recommend a fix, and then actually prepare construction documents so that a contractor can come in and make the fix.

EV: Going back to when you had the idea of having your own business, was there anybody that encouraged you?

RN: My wife encouraged me. I guess, when I would talk to my friends they would encourage me. Other colleagues that I knew encouraged me. In fact, Robert and Arnold were encouraging because they wanted to move in to something else, and that was an opportunity for them to sell their business, and they encouraged me from the point of view of telling me that they felt that I could continue with the business, and do well, so they were very encouraging.

EV: What were the economic conditions in the region when you became a partner and, eventually, the owner?

RN: Well, we went through several phases. I guess, like right now we are going through an economic downturn. I don't remember specifically in the period over which time I transitioned from just an employee into a partner, but we probably went through several phases. I don't remember one phase being a real high economic or real low, so I think it was pretty much kind of an average, if you will.

EV: Did you need any funding to start?

RN: No, because part of what we did on one of the projects that I was involved with them, I had saved some money, and I was able to put some money into a project that had involved some land sales, and as a result, one of the pieces of property valuation went way up, and so as a way to buy them out, they in affect took my portion of that property as payment for the engineering company, so they benefited from it, and I think I benefited from it, and so it worked out very well. It was fortunate that this happened, otherwise I probably would have had to pay for the interest of the company over a period of years. As it turns out, once the transaction was done, then I was able to continue with the company without having a financial obligation for its ownership.

EV: Did you encounter any obstacles?

RN: I can't think of anything other than the ups and downs of doing business, doing projects where not everything goes right. You're involved in, even litigation, but not any real major problems.

EV: What factors have helped your company grow?

RN: I think we built the reputation that by doing work for so many companies, our attitude has always been to provide the best services that we could, and I stress excellence in our work as the primary factor. I think everything stems from that. If you stress excellence, the idea of continuing to do work becomes a direct result because people are satisfied, they are happy with what you do, they want to hire you again. We have the same attitude during the construction period, where we work with the contractor, even though they are not our employee, nor are we their employee, they get hired by the owner, and the owner hires us to oversee the construction, but our attitude is always to work with a contractor on a team basis. It didn't always work out that way, so as a result we also developed a good reputation with contractors. As a result, that's been helpful for us in terms of landing projects like the Texas Tech buildings. Their people in Lubbock were familiar with our work, not only from other firms, but from the contracting industry locally, where we never had any major problems, thank goodness, so—either with a project and structure and the construction or with the contractor. Though we had a couple of problems and those got resolved finally.

EV: You already mentioned your family, how many children do you have?

RN: I have three daughters and three grandchildren, and they were all—in the case of my daughters, my wife, and I stressed that they would go to college, and when we talked about it, we didn't talk about it as if it were something they might do, we just talked about it as something they would do, without sort of nagging, but just making it a part of their lives, part of their thought process, when they go to college, when you go to college, so they each got a good education. One of my



daughters went to Texas Tech, and the other two went to University of Texas at Austin. They all live in Austin, and they all are doing very well. So their education really helped them. One of my daughters is a district manager for Starbucks, in the Austin area, and she is being groomed to be a human resource person. My other daughter has her own business, and she is an image consultant. She makes presentations before corporations, schools, chambers of commerce, and talks about how to succeed in life, how your whole person is so important from the way you dress to the way you present yourself, and so she's been very successful. She started with another company that had offices in several parts of the United States, including New York, so she got good training with that company, and then she spun off her own business. Most of her business is in Texas, Austin, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, but she is also going out of town. My third daughter, I mentioned to you, she's the sales director for the Country Club at the UT Austin Club. They call it the Texas Club. My grandchildren are all doing well. They're also told they are going to go to college, so they have selected their college or university, and it is something they do when they are small—relate to sports, or whatever, but they relate to a university, so hopefully they are on the same track.

EV: What is your wife's name?

RN: Merle. M-e-r-l-e.

EV: And your daughters names?

RN: They are Laura, Jennifer and Sara, without the h.

EV: What role has your family played in the growth of your business?

RN: Very supportive. I am, I guess you can say I am probably a workaholic, so the fact that I am not home as much as I'd like to be, they've been very supportive, so

I spend as much time as I can when I am not working, but I spend a lot of time at work. So I think their primary role has been support, first my wife, and then also my daughters. Even as they were growing up and now, they've been very supportive.

EV: What challenges have you faced growing a business as a Hispanic?

RN: As a Hispanic? Probably, initially, just the ability to probably access financing. Although I never had specific problems, I think if you don't have a base of people that you know that have a financial background, it's difficult to establish your base as opposed to somebody that has relatives or friends that have wealth that can support you.

EV: How did you establish that base, in your case?

RN: Really, little by little. I've been involved in things that I enjoy doing, which were also helpful for networking. I was involved with the Lions Club and then starting in 1983, I joined the Rotary Club of El Paso, and I got very involved. I got involved with the board and became president, and I've met a lot of really good people, business people, that have been helpful, and a lot of times they'll serve on boards where we make a presentation, and the ability for them to say that they may know me as an individual, not necessarily even from a technical point of view, but just because they know me through my participation in civic and local entities or whatever, where I get involved is helpful. It's just a contact networking base. So it is always important to have that, I think. If you isolate yourself you have a tendency not to have the ability to communicate to obtain what you need. So, I think it is a win-win, you can help people and people can help you. And it is not that they help you because they know you, it's because they help you because you know what you do, or how you do your business. I am not looking for people to vote for me because they know me, I would like for

them to say they would vote for me because they know what I do, and how I do things.

EV: Right. And what percentage of your business do you consider to be based in Hispanic population?

RN: You know, since we deal with government, educational, we don't deal directly with individuals, and even companies when we do work with companies, to be honest with you, I don't know. I never think about it, I just think about the project and the individuals and sometimes the board of directors are made up of both Hispanics and non-Hispanics, so I really don't think about the issue.

EV: So it's not really relevant?

RN: No, and I'll be honest with you, I've thought about business in terms of just succeeding, and doing the best I can, and not becoming, kind of, stuck or embittered or setback because I think too much about whether what I do or not may be as a growth of being a Hispanic. That result in this human world, that's probably true, that I may have missed some opportunities, but maybe I've gained some opportunities. I just look at it and do the best you can and get whatever job you go after.

EV: Does your company enjoy any advantages for being a Hispanic owned business?

RN: The fact that we are Hispanic, we are designated as, now I can't think of the term. It's a term by being registered with the State of Texas as a minority, and as a result, we end up on teams where they have to satisfy the minority percentage, but I'm not sure that this has ever been a big factor. Since our work is so critical, if the selection people on a team would select us only because of that, and they had a problem on a project, they couldn't afford to do that, so to what extent it's been helpful, I don't know, but hopefully in order to get it started, it was helpful, and

we still list ourselves—and they still ask us, as part of their submittal process, to submit our credentials as a minority, and I can't think of the term, I'll think about it in a minute.

EV: Sure. At any point did you encounter any discrimination?

RN: I don't think I've ever had anything that I would call discrimination that actually caused me to lose a job or have a disadvantage. As I said before, the way I approach a job, I go straight for what needs to be done, so I've never had something where that issue came up per se. I can't say that it did.

EV: Have you expanded beyond the local area?

RN: Yes, we have done work outside of El Paso. In most cases it's when we used to do work for Hunt Building Corporation, and we did projects on several Army installations in Mississippi, California. I don't remember all of the places. We used to do a good amount of work in New Mexico, particularly in Las Cruces, and I've got a license in New Mexico, but now, unless you have an office in New Mexico, it's almost impossible to be selected for a project in New Mexico. They give a hometown advantage, a lot of strength, so unless you live somewhere in New Mexico, the chances of you getting a job in New Mexico are pretty small. They tend to select New Mexico firms.

EV: Are you a part of any of the Chambers of Commerce?

RN: Yes, both of them. I served as Chairman of the El Paso Greater Chamber of Commerce, and I have been with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce for as long as I can remember.

EV: What have been the advantages of participating in the chambers?

RN: It's kind of the same thing. You meet a lot of people in a lot of different businesses, and by having gotten involved with the leadership, you also hear a lot from the businesses, complaints, recommendations for what they think should be done, advice, complaints, but I think I learned a lot during that period. I got involved with a lot of people that are very active, and high profile in the community, serving on boards, owners of large organizations, and looking through this list, for instance, I know a lot of the people that are in my business related. Hector Holguin is a good friend, Mario Montes is a good friend, and I know the contractor in the company, he is much younger than I am, but I noticed he was on the last page, Oscar Venegas. I've met a lot of these people. I've know Lorraine Wardy, Fred Loya used to be in our Rotary Club, a good contact there. I got to meet him, and we developed somewhat of a relationship, and he helped—I was in charge of a project for Celebrity Chef, and he helped by contributing wine, and stuff. I know Cecilia Mulvihill very well, Fermin Dorado since he had been a member of, or really, the City Engineer. Richard Acosta used to be a member, and was the Chair of the El Paso Water Utilities Board, Public Service Board, so that contact would just—I didn't know him very well, but he would see when we would make a presentation for a project, we do a lot of work for the El Paso Water Utilities, we have designed almost all of their water treatment and sewer treatment plants over the last, I don't know, fifteen years.

EV: Do you see yourself as a leader or role model?

RN: I do. I get involved. If you look at my resume, I've gotten involved in a lot of organizations. I have served on the State Board of Licensing for Engineering. I was the chair of that board. I served on the Consulting Engineers Organization Group and I became president of the State Organization. I served ASAE, became vice-president of the State Organization. I founded local chapters of the Structural Engineers Association of Texas, which I was also president of that association. And then I founded a local chapter. Same thing with the Consulting Engineers, I founded the chapter, locally. I helped found, or establish the

American Concrete Institute Chapter in El Paso, and I served as president. I think I was the second president. Whenever I get involved with something, I like to get involved right away at a leadership level. I don't like to belong, and just sort of sit back. I always see things that I would like to change or do or modify, so The Chamber probably took a longer time, because I was a member, and I served on the board, and then served as Vice-President of Finance, and then I then I served as vice-president of (something else??), and then I finally served as president-elect, and then president. For two years I served as President of the Chamber of Commerce Foundation. I just finished two years of that. So, yeah, I guess, the answer would be yes.

EV: Looking back at your business, what would you have done differently?

RN: I've thought of this, and I talked with my wife about it, I spent a lot of time, extra time, in all these extracurricular activities. Success is measured by many different ways by many different people, but one measure of success is your financial success, and one of the things that always was critical, of the most (upper most??), is excellence, as a result, I also wanted to participate in all of these organizations. For instance, if I were to advise young people, I would say, "Put excellence right at the top, but put profit right at the top, don't forget about the profit because if you are in business you should be in business to make a profit. If you're not making a profit, then somebody else can do it, and you can work for somebody else." So, if anything, I would say I would have given more emphasis to profit. What you do with profit? Well, you can create more opportunities for other people as well.

EV: Do you consider that the business climate is better for Hispanics today than years ago?

RN: Yes, I do. I see our culture in El Paso, and when I say culture, I'm talking about the combined culture, as being improved toward the Hispanic population by one

primary simple item, and that's education. I see young people achieving and I see them having more confidence, and that's evolved from the way they grew up as compared to how their family grew up. They see themselves as a full partner of this community. I think their families saw themselves as a secondary partner, and that was self—. At one of our meetings, I made the comment to Doctor Natalicio that El Paso was beginning to have more pride in itself than it has in the past, and she said, "Yeah, but we've got a long ways to go," and that's still true. For whatever reason, the way El Paso evolved, its own self-perception has been low, but I think the education component, where more and more young people—Hispanics are being educated and becoming successful, and what happens is that it really creates that feeling in their children because now they look up at their parents as having gone through an education, and so their goals and their aspirations are naturally higher. Years ago they would look at their parents and they would assume that their goals and aspirations should be like their parents, so it wasn't anybody's fault, it was just the development of our culture as well as the local culture. But you know, I look around, and more and more of the government, the boards, and the leadership is Hispanic, so, yeah, that is a huge change.

EV: What advice would you offer Hispanics starting a business today?

RN: I would advise them not to let it get in the way because some young people let it get in the way. Go out there and compete, use all your resources, be straight forward and honest, and communicate with as many people as you can to establish your network you'll always use, and when I say use, I don't mean you'll need to call them, but it'll always be there. You'll have help when you're not even expecting it. Don't create enemies. You create enemies, and it spreads. It's like a disease. Their word of mouth starts to become a problem. Sometimes you can't help it, but avoid creating it. It's not good for you. What I'm thinking of, really, is if you have a tendency to respond quickly to something in a negative fashion, it is more likely to get you in a problem than anything else. If you feel

that you have a legitimate gripe, then you should respond to it, but weigh your consequences. That doesn't mean that you give in to something, just weigh the consequences.

EV: What hopes do you have for the future?

RN: Oh, I'm real high on El Paso—the culture, the economy, everything. I have seen a lot of stuff develop, and the Texas Tech College, the UTEP expansion, water desalination, which is the only plant that has actually been set up inland, of that size, in El Paso and nobody else can say that, so it can help to develop a huge industry in the Southwest. It used to be that desalination of water was very expensive, and nobody even thought about it, but now it's proving to be less and less expensive. It's still not the cheapest way to get water, but it's become less expensive, and El Paso, from the water desalination point of view, has the opportunity to develop like a laboratory, a real live, ongoing laboratory where companies will come here, and develop the filters that they use. Other Southwest companies will come in, the Fort Bliss Expansion, has been—in today's paper and yesterday's paper, I don't know if you've seen it, but they—. Today they announced that new shopping center. It's a four hundred thousand square feet of shopping. That's huge. I haven't seen it, but I've heard about it. They said it's a fabulous place. The business that they'll do there is going to be fantastic for El Paso, and of course, all of the incoming families. The unfortunate situation of the Juárez drug problem has caused some benefit to El Paso. A lot of the people coming to El Paso, and there are some pros and cons to this, are people that are educated, have some wealth, and their children also are—. We knew before that, that a lot of the people from Juárez sent their children to school in the United States. Well now their second nature is that they're becoming citizens, so they have created an additional component of wealth and professions that we didn't have. I wish it hadn't happened that way, but it is a reality of what's happened. It was a loss for Juárez and a gain for El Paso. There's been some problems with a lot of the people coming over in terms of having enough houses, streets, traffic



has grown, but the net result is probably over the years they'll assimilate and become full-time residents, and they'll be able to contribute to the community. But I know I see this community as wonderful, a wonderful future for a lot of reasons. UTEP has got a fabulous reputation. I go to meetings in other parts of Texas, and particularly engineers graduating from UTEP have a good reputation, and have done well in whatever they've done. As a group, obviously we have some that have done very well, and some that have not done well, but a lot of them have gained reputations as head of businesses, they've developed businesses. Some of the people that have given money back to UTEP have been in the engineering field or oil engineering field, so UTEP is a big positive. The downtown area, I think, is going to develop. It was growing pretty well until we hit the economic snag, and the Juárez Cartel problem, but I think it is still going to develop and evolve. I am involved with the Paso del Norte, it's an organization downtown, and there's a lot of stuff going on. Most people don't know about it, but there's a lot of work going on to improve the downtown, and when it starts to happen, well it's already started. The, I can't think of the name of the building, Paul Foster's building that he's converting to living space, when that gets finished and they start selling, because those are going to be highly desirable, you are gonna see an inflow of people to the downtown area, and that is gonna cause the downtown to develop more. People want to live downtown, like they do in other communities, and we have never had a big component of downtown population. Most people went away from the central part of town. But in general, no, I see nothing but a bright future.

EV: Well, Sir, I don't have any more questions. Is there anything you would like to add?

RN: No, I don't think so. I appreciate the opportunity. It is kinda nice to talk about these things, just because you think about them in little spurts. You have a thought process where you go from one topic that sort of leads into the next. I've talked to different people about their interest sometimes in conversation, but that's

it. I wanted to ask you about the program. I don't know if you want me to while it's part of the interview or not.

EV: I think we can stop the interview and we can talk about that. Let me just do the closing.

EV: This was an interview with Robert Navarro on May 14th, 2010 in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Edmundo Valencia. This interview is part of the Paso del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project.

**[End of Interview]**

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