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Interview no. 1491

Mike Garcia

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University of Texas at El Paso

Institute of Oral History

Interviewee: Mike Garcia

Interviewer: Kristine Navarro

Project: Paso del Norte Entrepreneurship Oral History Project

Location: _____

Date of Interview: 23 July

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Transcriber: GMR Transcription Services

Biographical Synopsis of Interviewee: Mike Garcia was born in Ciudad Juárez, México on July 13, 1935. Mike attended Lydia Patterson Institute in El Paso, Texas. His mother was Benita Enbarrabe. Mike is the founder and owner of Mike A. Garcia Painting in El Paso, Texas.

Summary of Interview: Mike was brought to El Paso by his godmother to attend school at Lydia Patterson Institute in El Paso, Texas when he was 11 years old. Mike had his first job working at a bowling alley in El Paso at the age of 12. At the age of 15 years old, he got married. Mike cared for and loved his mother Benita very much. He recalls that she taught him to better his life, to better his family, to do the proper thing, to be honest with himself, and to have self-respect. Mike has used these concepts to build his life and his career as a businessman. After Mike left school at the age of 12, he never returned however he used every job and life in general as his schooling. Mike seized any opportunity to learn. After he was married at the age of 16, Mike worked with Prices Creameries for six months and then left to work for a company out of Arlington Texas called Fitzgerald, as a painter. The owner, Harold Fitzgerald was very helpful to Mike, teaching him about the painting business and helping Mike during hard times. Mike worked for Fitzgerald for over a decade and then decided to open his own painting business. In 1958, Mike started Mike A. Garcia Painting in El Paso, Texas. He has contracted work with Fort Bliss, Holloman Air Force Base. He has worked all over Texas, in many cities across the United States as well as abroad. Mike faced some discrimination over the years due to misconceptions and stereotypes about the Mexican/Hispanic work ethic. Mike worked harder to prove them wrong and thus his business was successful. Mike eventually got into real estate by purchasing properties and renting them out. Mike was able to meet many people who he built lasting personal and professional relationships with. Mike was chairman of the Civil Service Commission; he was active in the Good Government League. He has also been active in LULAC, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the El Paso Sheriff Department, the YMCA of El Paso, and city politics. Mike felt it necessary to be involved with the city of El Paso in order to give back.

Length of interview: 64:00

Length of Transcript: 28 pages

Name of Interviewee: Mike A. Garcia
Date of Interview: July 23rd
Name of Interviewer: Kristine Navarro

KN: Today is July 23rd. My name is Kristine Navarro, and I am interviewing Mr. Mike Garcia. Good morning.

MG: Good morning, how are you?

KN: I'm good. How are you?

MG: Just fine, and welcome to my office.

KN: Thank you very much for having us and inviting us. I'd just like to start a little bit about your background, and when and where you were born.

MG: I was born in Juarez on July 13th, 1935.

KN: Okay, can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

MG: Well, I thought it was a very good one, and I wanted to have a career. I wanted to have a good education, but I have to quit school after grammar school to help my family, to help my mother. We're quite a few, and we didn't have much, so I have to start working, and I did a lot of things when I was a kid in order to earn my living to help my mother.

And I was anxious to learn a profession or learn something to do, and thank God I had a godmother that cared for me a lot, and she brought me back to El Paso. So here, I went to school. I went to school in the Lydia Patterson Institute downtown, and I went there for about a year, and then I started looking for work, so I – and I started as a paint boy, and I had several jobs where I make money to help my mother.

KN: Tell me about your first job.

MG: Well, I was a paint boy in a – I worked with some contractors, cleaning and all that, and finally, you know –

KN: How old were you? Sorry.

MG: Oh, I was about 12, 13. And finally, I got married, so I got a job with Price's Creameries.

KN: How old were you when you got married?

MG: 15, I think – 16, something like that.

KN: Do you remember the first – you said you were a paint boy when you were 12 and 13 – do you remember the contractor's name?

MG: Well, he's not a contractor. It was a bowling alley here on Montana and Piedras. I don't remember the name, and then another – I don't really remember the name. I will remember in a minute. I used to set paint, and I used to work seven days a week, and it was very nice because I was making money, helping my mother, and I was very happy.

KN: Tell me about your mom – her name, please.

MG: Her name is Benita Enbarrabe.

KN: Tell me about her. What do you remember?

MG: Well, she's a great mother, a great person. She was born in 1900, and she died in '89, so she was a beautiful person, and I will do anything for my mother, and this is a reason I took a sense of a responsibility if you wanna call it because, like I said, I wanted to be a musician. To be a musician, you gotta go school. You gotta study, and I didn't have time. I either work or study, and I didn't have time to work. So this is why I'm not a musician. That was my dream.

It was my dream so bad that whenever I could afford it, I built my house, and the first thing I did – you know, with everything – but I also bought piano, a grand piano, because that was my dream to play the piano, and I still have it. I had never played it. I had never got a lesson, but at least I got the piano, and that make me feel good. Now that I can afford it, I don't have the time to play it, but I don't mind because, like I said, life has been very good to me. I got more than what I deserve, and I'm a very lucky person, I think.

KN: Can you tell me why you had to go to work at such a young age?

MG: Because I didn't have a father, and all my oldest brother got married. So when you get married, they got their own house, and my mother didn't have anybody to help her, so I have to take over the best I could at that time.

KN: How was the pressure? I mean, you were just – you were –

MG: I have no pressure because I had too much love for my mother. Since the moment that I could afford it, my mother didn't have no money problems because I took care of that, and she used to travel a lot, and that was my pleasure to give her whatever she needed, and I took care of her until she died, the day she died. So I was very pleased with everything she taught me – what she mean to me.

KN: What did she teach you?

MG: To better your life, to better your family, to do the proper thing, to be honest with yourself, and self-respect, and try to better myself. This is why I like to think that the good Lord is being good to me and take care of me and my kids because I like to take care of my kids, all of my kids. Now I'm doing it with my grandkids. Every time they go to college, here I am. Thank God, I can do that. I can help them out.

KN: Can you tell me – you mentioned a godmother?

MG: Yeah, she's dead, you know, for a long time, she was a very religious person. When you gotta protect somebody, it becomes huge, and that's what she taught. This is the reason she brought me back to El Paso because she was living here in El Paso.

KN: And her name?

MG: I knew you were gonna ask this. I'll remember in a minute.

KN: Okay, and did you live with her when you were here in El Paso.

MG: Yes, I was. Yes, I was here in El Paso, and I used to go see my mother every day, and I used to walk all the way to Juarez. She live a couple blocks from the bridge, and so it wasn't a problem, and I could fly in those times, but it was a pleasure for me to do what I did.

KN: After you left the house, were there still children with your mom living?

MG: No.

KN: Were you the last one?

MG: Well, yeah, I was not the youngest, but next to the youngest, and they got married, but I don't know. They never looked back to my mother, and this is why I have to be there. Somebody had to help my mother. She was a wonderful person, very strong person, very demanding, and very honest, and thank God. I like to think I learned from her.

KN: After you went to Lydia Patterson for one year, were you able to return to school?

MG: No, ma'am. I wish I could, but this is the reason that all my kids been to college. That's what I want because I know how important it is to get an education, and so when my kids graduated from UTEP very nicely. This is why I love UTEP because some of my kids been there. They've been in New Mexico State – all over – thank God, but there's nothing better than a good education.

KN: Let's talk a little bit about what you learned while working at the bowling alley.

MG: Well, I learned that life is not easy. It's very demanding, and you gotta do what you're supposed to do if you wanna make it in life because that's where you learn. That was my school. Everywhere I worked, you were like a classroom for me.

KN: And what did you learn from that?

MG: To be honest, to desire something better, to learn to be grateful with my beautiful city because even though they already have the education, I wanted to help my city, El Paso. But here, you gotta guy from Juarez that don't have much education, and I got to be chairman of Civil Service Commission for many years.

So you're conducting a meeting with the police and this and that, and I didn't have any education except the one the good Lord gave me, and that was a privilege for me because the good Lord told me to do something good, and I think I have. I devoted more than 50 years for my city. I never got a single penny out of that. I had the pride that I had done it.

KN: Why was community service so important to you?

MG: Because this is our city, and if we don't support our city, who's gonna do it? This is why I got involved. There's a YMCA, and I got involved with many things in politics, and I got involved with

the Good Government League. I got involved civil service, in quite a few things, thank God.

KN: So after you worked at that bowling alley, and you got married?

MG: Yes, I got married.

KN: Okay, and did you live in El Paso?

MG: Yes, I always lived in El Paso. I always got – and then I started – my businesses started growing, and I started getting better contracts and all that, and I had done at about maybe 200-300 jobs at Fort Bliss, Holloman, White sands – I even work in York. I work all over the state of Texas.

KN: Okay, let's go back a little bit about Price's Creameries. What did you do at Price's Creameries?

MG: You know where the milk comes out? There's a machine, you know. I used to check the milk, the tanks of milk, that everything was proper and all that. That's all I did.

KN: How much did you earn while at Price's?

MG: 90 cents an hour.

KN: And how long did you work there?

MG: About six months.

KN: And why did you leave?

MG: Because I got a job that paid me \$2.75 an hour, three times as much, and I could not let it go.

KN: How did you come to getting that job?

MG: Well, like I said, one day my little car broke down, so I have to go San Jacinto, plus I have to get the bus. So I was waiting for the bus, and this friend of mine from Juarez came over, and we started talking. He told me he was a painter. Then he asked me how much I was making, so I told him I was making 90 cents an hour, and then he told me he was making \$2.75.

When he told me that, I started asking him questions, and then he said, "Well, they hire painters," and I was not a painter, but I called

the office where I work, and I told them that I was sick, and I went to see if they'd hire me, and they did. And this is how I became a painter – because I was hungry for work, hungry for money, and I needed it pretty bad.

KN: What was the name of the office or the business that you went to work for?

MG: It's a company out of Arlington, Texas. The name of the contractor was Fitzgerald, and my supervisor was John Sullivan, and he had a little problem drinking too much, but that helped me because he put me – he taught me more and more about the business, so he could have more free time. And I used to work very hard, but he did a big favor to me because he taught me everything I know.

KN: And how did he teach you? I mean, what would he do?

MG: Well, he –

KN: Or what did he teach you?

MG: Well, about the painters, about how to mix the paint, about how to take the hours for every employee, and check what we needed, and then to paint. He just spent a lot of time with me at the beginning to teach me how to run his work because he didn't wanna do it, or maybe he had something else to do.

KN: Were you eager to learn while you worked?

MG: Very much, yeah, because every time I did a little better, I got a raise, and then my boss was very nice. And I say that because one time, my mother was very sick here in El Paso, and I put her in the hospital, and he give me – he lend me the money. Excuse me.

KN: Okay, so you were telling me about your mother was very sick and–

MG: And then she was in the hospital, and she had cancer. And then it cost a lot of money, so I went to my boss and borrowed the money, and he was willing to give it to me.

KN: Who was your boss at that time?

MG: Harold Fitzgerald, the same boss, the same person, and he was so nice to me. He gave me all the money that I needed to pay for the

hospital, and my mother got well, and then he kept getting me raises and raises, so that give me the opportunity to work more and learn more, and thank God. I'm very grateful.

KN: What else did you learn while you worked there?

MG: I learned about life, about business, about being responsible, about caring for the people that put their trust in me, and that's a lot. That was my school. That was my college.

KN: How long did you work there?

MG: I worked for about 13-14 years.

KN: Okay, and then what did you do after that?

MG: And then I became a painter. I decided to go on my own.

KN: Why did you decide to go on your own?

MG: Because I didn't wanna go outta town. He was in Arlington, Texas, and I had no business in Arlington, Texas. So I started painting here in El Paso.

KN: How did you start your own business?

MG: Where I worked, there was a company that gave the houses and buildings to my boss, and then when he left, they didn't have nobody, so they asked me, "Why don't you become a contractor?" And I didn't think I could do it, so they keep asking me, "Who does the painting?"

"I do."

"Who handles the people?"

"I do."

And he says, "How come you cannot be a contractor? You do everything." And then he said, "Well –," he said, "Let me give you one house, and you do it, and if you come out all right, you continue. If not, you do whatever."

So he gave me one house, and this is how I got started.

KN: Do you remember the name of that company that –

MG: No, I don't remember the name. It's been a long time.

KN: Okay, so they gave you your first contract?

MG: My first contract.

KN: A house on Bliss or –?

MG: No, it was over there on – by Rush there. And there not used to be any houses on the other side on Bowman – none at all at that time, so this is why we painted a lot of houses. It was my beginning.

KN: So after your first house, how did it go?

MG: I did very good because I worked day and night because now it was me. It was nobody else. I was learning, and I wanted to do so bad I can taste it, so I thanks to the good Lord, he gave me the opportunity to learn, and thank God for that.

KN: How did you determine the name of your business?

MG: Well, I couldn't find a better name than my own. This is why I call Mike A. Garcia Painting.

KN: Okay, so what year was it that you started?

MG: '58.

KN: '58? Okay.

MG: Yes, ma'am.

KN: And after you did your first house, did you hire?

MG: Yes, I hired one of my brothers, my younger brother, and then another painter, and then another painter, and then thank God, at one time, I had over 100 employees.

KN: What period was that that you had over 100 employees?

MG: Well, when I did the Marriott. I did all the painting in the Marriott, and I did all the Marriott in San Antonio, and I did the museum close to City Hall and downtown, and I got a lot of jobs in Fort Bliss, Holloman, White Sands, and all that.

KN: How did you build your company? How did you grow it?

MG: Well, like I said, with the help of a lot of people – with the help of the bank and all that. This is how I met Fred Hervey – quite a few people.

KN: Let's talk about the banks and access to capital. Did you need additional money to start?

MG: Oh, yes, of course, because when you work for a general contractor, they don't pay you every week. They pay you every month. Whenever they get paid, you get paid. If they don't get paid, you don't get paid. This is why you need credit. This is how I started borrowing \$5.00, then \$10.00, and all that, then you build up, and then if you do good, they help you.

KN: Who did you borrow the money from, initially?

MG: Well, what's the name of the bank? It was Fred Hervey's bank, but I don't remember the name. It changed names so many times.

KN: Was it State National or –

MG: No, not State National.

KN: – El Paso National?

MG: I think it was – what was it? It was, first, Hervey's Bank.

KN: When did you decide you needed to get more money or borrow money – as soon as you started or –?

MG: No, as soon as I started getting more employees, and then you think you're gonna get paid when – when you paint a house, you finish, they pay you. When a general contractor, you don't get paid until he gets paid, so you need to have credit somewhere in order to continue. And the bigger you are, the more money you need, so – and the more problems you have. If you're not prepared, then you got a lot of problems because you gotta pay so much of your earnings to the bank or whoever lend you the money.

KN: And how did you get the loans? Did you just walk into the bank and say, "I'm here," or –?

MG: Well, I used to bank with the banks, and I never had any problem, so then I borrowed \$500.00 and then \$1,000.00, and all this is how I became – came down.

KN: Did they ever say no to you?

MG: No, never.

KN: Yeah, you had no problems getting –

MG: No, ma'am, no.

KN: Okay, so you continued to extend your line of credits, get –

MG: Right.

KN: And how did you learn how to manage the money? Did you have someone do the financing, or did you work on the financing?

MG: Well, like I said, how I learned – because I knew the value of a penny or a dollar – and I knew what I have to do, and I'd like to think I'm very responsible. I'd like to think that I might not have anything, but I got good credit because, thank God, I've been in business for a long time, and nobody can accuse me of stealing anything, so thank God for that.

And more than that is the good Lord. If there's God, there's a way. This is what I think.

KN: Okay, can you tell me – so you started small, and you grew your business, and were there any other jobs that you remember that were large jobs?

MG: Well, and then I had a lot of jobs, like I said, in Fort Bliss. I've done a quite a few big ones there, and I've been very lucky. Thank God.

KN: How did you come to those contracts at Fort Bliss?

MG: Well, there is a list that comes every month of the jobs coming in El Paso or Fort Bliss or whatever, and if you're a contractor, you get a list, and you start bidding. And if you got the right price, you get the job. If you don't, you don't. And the only way you get a good price is by experience. By that time, I thought I had the experience, and I never lost money on any jobs, so I think I did pretty good so far.

KN: How did you learn to make the bids?

MG: The hard way.

KN: Tell me the hard way story.

MG: Well, I have a friend of mine that just die. He was an estimator, and he used to give me classes about how to work a plan – how you measure, how you do this, and about paint and Sheetrock and all that. That's the way. He taught me a lot, so thank God to him.

KN: And his name?

MG: His name was Jose Gonzalez – Joe Gonzalez. He died about six months ago – beautiful person.

KN: And so he taught you – did he make the bids for you or –

MG: Well, at the beginning –

KN: – just talked?

MG: – yes, but then he never charged me a single penny, so this is why I appreciate it more. He used to put a lot hours in teaching me and never charged me for anything. He was a great person.

KN: Were you bidding against larger contractors?

MG: Oh, yes, quite a few. At that time, we were maybe about 15 painting contractors – 15 or 20 or 25.

KN: Throughout El Paso?

MG: El Paso. Now, there's a thousand, I guess.

KN: Right. Did you ever feel intimidated by bidding against?

MG: No, thank God.

KN: And then –

MG: That's one thing that I don't know. I don't know the meaning of "no." I don't know the meaning of being afraid or not to believe. There's not a Mike Garcia.

KN: Were you usually successful when you made a bid for a painting contract?

MG: Not all the time, but many times, even that I was not the low bidder, they give it to me because they thought I – they knew my work, and they know I could finish it and do a good job.

KN: Were there certain people that were instrumental in helping your business grow?

MG: Oh, yes, quite a few.

KN: Could you name some of them, and tell me why, please?

MG: Manny Montes, he's a big contractor. He's the one that gave me a lot of work and quite a few people that helped me. Bert Sambrano, Sam Sambrano – SamCorp – gave me a lot of work – very good people to me, so quite a few people. I did job for quite a few contractors. I don't think there's not a contractor in town that I had not worked for.

KN: And how did you develop those relationships with the contractors?

MG: By being hungry, by being honest, by being – by having the need for working and having the people to do the work, and thank God, like I said, it's been very nice. It's been like a challenge to me.

KN: What else have you learned along the way since your business opened? What other things have you learned?

MG: Well, I guess the biggest think is by believing in the good Lord. He will help you, and you need the right people. You see, life is so nice. You go through life, and if you don't learn characters to people, you don't learn anything.

KN: Who were the right people, as you referred to them?

MG: Jonathan Rogers, Fred Hervey, Ray Pearson, Hughes Butterworth – those people that I respect so much.

KN: Why are they the right people?

MG: Because they taught me. I learned from them because I learned how they do things, how they do business, how they handle family, how they handle friends, and to me, they were wonderful people.

KN: What type of tips on how to learn business did they teach you?

MG: Well, first, about credit, responsibility, that whatever only issue you get, you better do it. Otherwise, you won't be here very long. Just like dying – if you don't do good, I don't know what's going to happen, so that's why I wanna do good. When I get there, I want the good Lord to say, "Well, did you try?" And that's pretty good.

KN: Can you tell me a little bit about some of the challenges that you encountered when you first started your business?

MG: Well, when I started my business, there were not too many Mexican contractors. We he had a lot of redneck people, and they thought the only thing we can do is to eat tacos and drink, and that's wrong. At least to me it's wrong, and this is why I work so hard. I need to prove those people that no matter who you are, you could be Chinese or Japanese or whatever, if you got it, why not let them use it and work and prove yourself? And I think a lot of people did because a lot of very important people helped me out, and I hope they see what I thought I had, and thank God this is the reason that so many people helped me, and I'm so grateful.

KN: Did you encounter discrimination?

MG: Yes, I did.

KN: Can you tell me a episode or a situation?

MG: Well, a lot of people think just because you don't have an education and you're a Mexican, you don't know anything. Like the other day I was talking to this person. He said, "Hey, you ever take a trip?"

And I said, "To where?"

He said, "You know, to Vegas?"

I said, "Okay, I'm gonna be very short." I said, "I been in New York at least 100 times, and there's not a major city in the United States that I have not been there. I've been to China. I've been to Hong Kong. I've been to France. I've been to England. I've been all over world." And using my food stamps, it worked pretty good because a lot of people think that you have to be blonde; you have to have a very good education to make it, and I know a lot of people who have degree, and they cannot make a living. You need a degree to make it. Quite a few of my friends, and I got telling

that picture, you know, they don't have a degree, but they're millionaires.

KN: What do you need to make it?

MG: They're willing to progress. They're willing to do right. They're willing to show the people that you are honest. They're willing to show that you care for your city. That's very important. If people see that on you, you show the people – help you a lot. Let me give an example. What do you think that the lady who put my name up went for me? Because I know her for quite a few years. She's a wonderful person, and I've been involved with many things that she's been involved in. She's a great lady.

So to me, it's an honor to be her friend. Queta Fierro, she's a wonderful lady – very, very – and a matter of fact, I put the house – I own the house that she grew up, and I just bought it for that reason, and she's very happy that I did that. I rent that property, but I did it because – what she meant to me.

KN: Have you diversified? When you said rental property, have you diversified in purchased properties that you're renting out now?

MG: I got about 20 properties, ma'am – paid for.

KN: Why did you choose to go that direction?

MG: Well, I needed to invest my money. And to me, if you don't have the education for something else, there's nothing better than real estate, even if it's a small one, because they never go down. They go up. Just like the taxes. They never go down. They're gonna go up, and every time I had a chance, I bought one.

KN: How did you learn about real estate and what to buy?

MG: Well, I learned by sacrificing myself. But like I said, I had never had a car or truck that I never paid cash, and this is the reason that I don't drive a new truck. Everybody said, "Hey, you know, you need a new truck," and I had that truck for 11 years. It runs better than a new car.

The agency said, "Hey, man giving me \$8,000.00, I can give you a brand new truck."

I said, "I don't need a new truck. I gotta new truck."

That's the reason because to me, one of the things to learn – the sense of a dollar, the sense of responsibility. Not that I'm responsible, but I'm trying to learn. After all these years, I'm trying to learn, and not only myself, but my kids. They got a good education. They got degrees and all that, and they got great families, and I hope they think of me once in a while and say, "Hey, if my father could do it without an education, we can do it better," and that's my point.

KN: Tell me why you pushed your children to get an education.

MG: Because what is better than education? Nothing is better, but a lot of people, I think they're wrong. They think that education is started at school, and it's not. Education is started at home.

Speaker 3: Buenos Dias.

MG: [Speaking Spanish].

KN: Okay, what opportunities did you have when you first started your business?

MG: What do you mean by that?

KN: Were there certain things that you knew about or certain strategies that you used when you first started your business?

MG: Well, I guess whatever I learned or whatever I needed, to put it that way, I learned it from my boss, from my mother, from the people close to me. Because every time I saw somebody that it was not good, he failed. He never made it, so that taught me. I said, "Hey, you better try to do the best you can." Because if you don't, that's what happens to you.

And when I was a kid, I saw a lot of older people. They had a lot of problems because they didn't have any money, okay? So I didn't wanna grow old and be a poor people. This is why I didn't bite anything that didn't produce any money, and this is the reason I got so many properties paid for because I don't wanna be poor. And with the help of the good Lord and so many people – thank to the good Lord – I didn't think I did so bad for being a poor, hard working boy -- shy Mexican – from Juarez. I think I did pretty good.

I enjoy it because I got nothing to show. The only thing I have to show is that I'm a proud American, and I'm a proud father, and thank the good Lord for that.

KN: Can you tell me a little bit about the many years – you said that you had over 100 employees – how did you manage 100 employees? Did you –

MG: Well, they were not easy, but like I said, I didn't start with 100. I started with one and then three and then five and then ten and you know. And it was not easy, especially because I didn't have an education. But I did because, like I said, again, you don't get an education only UTEP, or like I had one of my kids that was in El Paso High – junior – and he was student at El Paso High – very good kid.

So he said, "Dad, I don't wanna to go to UTEP. I wanna go to a good college."

And I said, "My son, if you get a good education, I'll take you anywhere you wanna go. If you make valedictorian, I'll guarantee you anywhere."

It was [inaudible] me and my big mouth, he became valedictorian, and I took him to Notre Dame. I took him here – everywhere. I took him to about ten universities, and he decided to go to Stanford, and he graduated from Stanford. Thank God, and I was very proud – being a junior and going to Stanford. I felt very good about it. Thank God, and that's what it meant to me.

And this is why I'm trying to help my grandkids and tell them the importance that it is to get a good education, and I'm doing it. Now they're going to college – I don't know. I'm here for whatever they need. And all that, thank to the good Lord.

KN: Can you tell me a little bit about – did you have any human resource issues? Or when you hired people or had to fire people, did you have any problems with that, or how did you learn how to do that?

MG: No, I don't think I did because, like I said, I'm from the school of hard knocks. That's where you learn. I'd like to think that ordinary – you know, with people – about who's honest and who's dishonest, and who's this, and who's that, and I think that's what make me – that I got to give it to the good priest to grow, to show something, that Jonathan Rogers, the people that – Don Henderson,

Baeza, you know? They're millionaires. I think I learned a lot from them – how to behave, how to be myself. Thank God.

KN: Can you tell me a little bit about the – you said you were a member of the Good Government League?

MG: Yes, ma'am.

KN: And what that is – or was?

MG: It was some business people that got together for good government. That's why they call it "Good Government." They used to pick the mayor and what to vote for, and I was very happy that they invited me.

KN: And what would you do?

MG: Well, I just went over and listened to what they have to say. I didn't say much because I didn't know anything, but I listened to how they do politics, how do they do this, and money and this and that. And then at the same time, it helped me because I knew quite a few business, and they start noticing me, and they start helping me – giving me job. So it helped me very, very much.

KN: How did they start giving you jobs?

MG: I'm sorry?

KN: How did they start giving you jobs? What did they –

MG: Painting their houses, their business – that's the way I – and then I knew that, again, if I did it right, I gotta job. If I don't, then I was going to fail, and I didn't wanna fail.

KN: Can you tell me a little bit – you said you got involved in politics?

MG: Yes, ma'am.

KN: Can you tell me your involvement?

MG: Well, like I said, I got involved with Fred Hervey. When he ran for mayor, I helped his campaign. And Don Henderson – many I help –

KN: Now how did you help?

MG: – and Ray Pearson – I'm sorry?

KN: How did you help the campaign?

MG: Money, working, go and talking to people and go door-to-door to tell them to vote for so-and-so and all that – this is how I help him.

KN: Okay, you mentioned something about you – about the poll tax?

MG: Yes, ma'am.

KN: Can you describe what that is and what you did?

MG: Okay, the poll tax was a document that you needed to have in order to vote in any election, and the LULACs was trying to help people or explain to people they need to – why a poll tax – and they need to people to sell them, and I was a volunteer to go and sell that in street corners.

KN: What was your involvement with LULAC?

MG: Nothing but that. I never been a member of LULAC because I've been very busy to be a good member of LULAC's. I know every president, and I know the big shot, but I never been a member. But every time they have a turnaround – they have this – I'm always there.

Like I said, with Mrs. Fierro, she's so active and this and that, so every time I can help with money, whatever, I'm there.

KN: Can you tell me a little bit – are you a member of the Chamber of Commerce?

MG: No, ma'am.

KN: The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce?

MG: I was, but not anymore.

KN: Okay, were they helpful to you – being members?

MG: I don't think so. I didn't think so. This is the reason that the Chamber of Commerce – I went to a few meetings with – I talked to some of my friends, and they didn't do much. The only thing that they did was collect dues every month, and I was not ready for that.

KN: How has it changed? You've been around a little while.

MG: Oh, yes.

KN: How has it changed?

MG: Well, I don't think they have changed. I think No. 1, in the Chamber of Commerce, they don't have people like Mike Garcia, so Mike Garcia can tell the new members, "Hey, you need to do this." They have people that they're not cultured. They don't know anything about business, and how can you recruit people? This is the reason, I think, they're having problems – or I don't know if they do – but I mean, they don't have no Mexican American. I continually watching them from this and that, but I really believe that they don't put the emphasis to recruit more people.

They wanna go after the money, where they can get that money, and I think they're wrong. In an election, to elect anybody, you need to have the facts right here so you can go and convince somebody to vote for so-and-so, and you gotta be sincere. You gotta be honest, and this is – I think they don't do that. They just call you, said, "Hey, Mike Garcia, you should be a member of the Chamber." I think that's wrong.

KN: And what about the Hispanic Chamber?

MG: It's even worse.

KN: Tell me why.

MG: Well, we, the Mexican Americans, once we make it, we don't wanna bother anymore. We're so busy trying to stay afloat that we don't wanna waste any time, and I think that's very wrong. This is the thing that I'm not a member of the LULAC because I don't have the time. I got too many things to do. Like for example, I work with the Y; I work with LULAC. The [inaudible] House, I'm still the president, and I got many things to do, and now I gotta run my business. So this is the reason I don't do more things with my city.

I think I've done enough. I put 20 years for the City of El Paso, and then I put about 15 with the sheriff's department, and I'm very pleased. I got pictures with all the sheriffs, and I laughed with all the sheriffs, which is very gratifying to say that I did something to pay my city back.

We talk a lot, and we do this and this, but I think I don't have to talk. They don't have to ask who Mike Garcia is, and thank God – I hope they don't ask Queta Fierro because she knows who I am and quite a few from El Dorado, from Zulack's, and all that – very good people. He's an engineer, was the city engineer, and when you got people like that, you don't feel bad. You feel good. You feel good because this is my country. I'm an American. I'm not a Mexican anymore. I'm an American.

KN: Can you tell me a little bit about your – you had mentioned the Civil Service Commission – what that is and –

MG: The Civil Service Commission for the City of El Paso is the one that handles all the problems about the crime, regulations, and all that. They work with the director of the city. It used to be Sam Navarro in my time. He was the city director, and you work out with the regulations, you work out with the police department, with the fire department – with all the problems that come out.

KN: What advice would you give any young entrepreneur who starting their own business?

MG: To be a good American, to be proud because I think this is where you don't show our respect of our country. The only regret I have that I didn't go into the Army. I went over to join the Army, and they wouldn't take me because of my mother and my brothers. I had too many liabilities, and they wouldn't take me. I went about four or five times because I wanted to be in the Army, and they wouldn't take me because of that.

They gave me 4F. I know you don't know about 4F, but 4F is that you are a liability. That's what it is. But I went quite a few times. I said, "I wanna join the Army," and they said, "Okay, who do you support?" And I told them my mother, and they said, "We don't need you," and that's my only regret that I have.

KN: Are there any other stories that you'd like to share about owning business or –?

MG: Well, honestly, like I said, the only thing I will tell anybody – believe in yourself. Don't believe it – as long as you believe in God and yourself, you got it made because nothing is easy. Nobody's gonna give you an opportunity if you don't deserve it. People are not stupid. They talk to you, and they're gonna learn from you, and then if you don't have it, you're not gonna get the

opportunity. This is why you gotta keep trying. I'm still trying. I'm still trying to tell people, "Hey, just give me a chance. Let me do my work."

And a lot of people think that I'm a very poor Mexican. Well, maybe I am, but I don't care. I know what I got. I know what the good Lord had give me. I know about my kids. How can you be poor when you got so many good family, when you have so many good kids? With a good education, everybody said, "Hey, you're a poor Mexican."

I said, "Yeah, but a very lucky Mexican. I mean, how many poor Mexicans do you know that have kids that – valedictorian of El Paso High and going to Stanford and went to visit every university in the United States and picked the one you want to?" And he picked Stanford, and he graduated from Stanford. Don't you think I should be proud?

Some of my kids, most of my kids, they can support if I needed to. Thank God I don't, but that's what make me very proud, but No. 1, I'm an American. I'm not a Mexican anymore. I've been in some problems with some Mexican that talk funny – wanted to talk bad about the United States. I wouldn't let him because it's not right. If they don't like it, get the hell outta here, and this is what I believe, you know?

KN: Have you ever not succeeded at something or failed something?

MG: Well, maybe as a husband. I don't know. To me, marriage is a beautiful, but at marriage, you gotta be honest with the smart people. If you don't have smart people, forget it because we're very selfish. We want it my way, or no way at all, and marriage is not there. It's not that. I mean, to me, marriage is just a little something that you plant. You gotta take care of that against water, wind, storms, or whatever.

It's very hard, but if you don't have it, you're not gonna succeed, and I have failed in that. And I feel pretty bad, but because of my kids, I always said what is right, "Marriage is beautiful. Marriage is the greatest thing in the world. Thank God." This is what I preach to my kids, and they know.

Like I said, they know who I am – at least I hope they do. To me, there is two Mexicans, the dumb Mexican Mike Garcia, and then a new breed, the new Americans, and they're American citizens.

They were born here, and this is why I'm so proud. And they are engineers. They do this, and they do that.

And my girls, they're very smart. I got one in Denver. Man, she managed so many buildings. Sandra, she's a beautiful lady. I don't know where she got the smart – not from me. But she is a very smart lady.

KN: Are any of your kids – are you planning on handing – pass your business down to any of your children?

MG: No. No, because they got degrees. They don't wanna be painters. Who wants to be a painter? And they forgot where they came from – where the money came from for them. But that's okay. I already proved to them. I told them – I said, "I hope when you are as old as I am, you have my money. I hope you do."

And the reason for that, like I told you, I saw so many old people when I was a kid that it was so bad that – you know here in El Paso, what do we do with old people? You put them in a nursing home. In Mexico, you let them die. That's terrible. I took care of my mother until she died. The day that she died, I had a big party for all my family. And one of my kids said, "Hey, you gotta be tonto. You gotta be stupid."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "We just buried our grandmother, and you're having a party?"

And I said, "Okay." I said, "How many times did you call your grandmother to see what she needed? How much money you put for the burial? How many time you calls you when she was in the hospital for six months? How much money do you put for her trips? For her bills, how much money you pay?"

And he didn't know what to say. "You know who did? This little Mexican." He never had any need to ask you or anybody, and this is why I'm so proud.

And when you got a member of your family, you should love when the person can see it, not when he dies. You can build a goldmine – never gonna see it – so what's the good of it? When the person is alive, enjoy it and not when he die.

This is what I keep telling me kids – "You know, when I die, I want you to have a party. Why? Because all the good Lord had give me, my family and everything I got." I said, "You know, I keep telling everybody that I'm a very shy Mexican. I'm not a Mexican, No. 1. I'm an American, and I'm not shy." Thank to the good Lord.

Like I said, I used to feel – in the beginning I used to feel like dumb when I was here in front of a Civil Service Commission. I was the chairman. I had the policeman, fireman, everybody, and I was in the middle, directing traffic, and then I used to think I'm not even qualified to be a garbage collector. Isn't that great? And here I am.

Don Henderson keep asking me, Baeza keep asking me, and Mr. – when they asked me – Fred Hervey, when got to be elected mayor, he called me. He said, "Mike, you gotta be part of this thing."

And I said, "Me?" I said, "Because I can hardly speak English, and you want me to be part of this."

He said, "You gotta be – you're gonna find out where you wanna serve the best, and let me know."

And I said, "Yes, then I'll do it."

So I used to have a good friend of mine, Carlos Bombach. He used to be the city engineer 50 years ago. Mr. Bombach, beautiful person, so I met him when I went to get permits and all that. So I went and talked to him, and I said, "Mr. Bombach, I need a favor. I need for you to help me. Mr. Hervey asked me to be somewhere on all this board, and I want you to help me, and tell me where I could be the best in service to El Paso."

And he said, "Civil Service."

And I said, "Why?"

He said, "Do you know that it's very hard for a Mexican to get a raise in the city? There's very few Mexicans as department heads or supervisors, and we need that – the police department, the fire department, and all that. Before, there was no Mexicans in the fire department and not too many Mexicans in the police department for sure," and he said, "That's where you start."

And he's the one that helped me out.

KN: How did he help you out?

MG: By choosing Civil Service. And as soon as I started learning, you start changing a little bit.

KN: What did you start learning as you served?

MG: About a person should be, in this place, if you do service, if you have the education, if you have the know-how, it should not be because you are Mexican or a Negro or Chinese. They got nothing to do with the things you can do.

KN: Did you start speaking out when you noticed?

MG: Oh, yes. Like I said, I'm not shy, thank God. I start speaking out, but getting the good things and brought it up to light.

KN: Such as?

MG: Well, for example – let me give you an example. When I was over in the Civil Service Commission, Mr. Hervey called me again, and he said, "There is a guy in the police department that is a crook, and I don't want him there. You need to get rid of him today," and that person was a very good friend of mine – very good friend of mine. I'm not gonna mention name because – so I went to him, and I said, "I need to talk to you."

And he looked at me and said, "What do you want, son of a bitch?" Excuse the language, but that what he call me.

I said, "I want you to retire."

He said, "What?"

He started cussing me out really bad, and I said, "Please do. Mr. Hervey doesn't want you there anymore. He knows what you're doing, and he wants you out," and anyway, and he starts telling me bad things about Mike Garcia, so I got a little disappointed and all that.

At that time, one of my older brothers was chief of – not chief – assistant chief of police in Juarez, okay? So then I said, "If somebody knows this person, it's him." So I called him up and had a meeting with him. I explained to him who he was.

He said, "Let me get everything ready, and I'll call."

I said, "Fine."

A week later he calls me and gave me like a book, a big book, with all the things that this person had done – got many bad things, but I mean many. So then again, I called this person, and I said, "Sir, I need to talk to you." And here again, he started cussing me out so bad, and I said, "Please, let me see you for five minutes." So he agreed.

So I went to his office, and I said, "I want you to read this, please," and he started looking at all that, and he said, "When do you want me to resign?"

I said, "Right now."

And he did, okay, so then he be kept my good friend because I gave him a chance. Mr. Hervey never saw that book. If he had seen that book, it could have been a lot of problem for him. And he became a very good friend to me until he died. Thank God. That's what I mean to me. Now that I did a good job, not that I'm good, but I always thank the good Lord for whatever I have done.

KN: How did you treat the men working for you?

MG: I think very good – very good because at the end, they thought I was very stupid – you know, start stealing for me, problems, and this and that. And then I said, "Hey, Mike Garcia, just a minute. Why are you putting up with this? You're not poor. You don't need to work anymore. Why this?"

And then I said, "Bye," and I got rid of everybody, including – my secretary was fooling around with one of my supervisors and taking money and all that, and I said, "Hey, I don't need this. Forget it," and I closed.

KN: How many people do you have working for you now?

MG: Four.

KN: Are they all painters or –?

MG: Painters, yeah – no, well, I got some that are retired, like carpenters, like Sheetrockers, and that – and I only call them when I used them. And they work for me because they're good

carpenters. They're good Sheetrockers. They're good at this, and I don't want any more work because I used to spend hours at that table because you know how many jobs come out a month in the City of El Paso? About 50. So to figure 50 jobs, you need many, many, many, many hours. I used to sleep over there.

And then you get 2 percent or 3 percent of what you bid, and it was not fun anymore to be here the whole week, bidding jobs that you're not sure you're gonna get. So then I said, "I don't need to support but one Mexican – this one – and I got enough to take care of that."

I keep telling my kids, "You know, I get a good check from the government every month," but I said, "You know, I at least got 22 good years."

They said, "What are you talking about?"

"Well, I got 22 properties paid for. If I sell one a year, I have 22 years, and I'm not gonna be here in 22 years," and thank God for that.

KN: How many more years will you keep your business open?

MG: Well, like I said, I got a lot of rentals, okay? So like the lady that came over, she came over to pay her rent, but as long as I can, as long as I'm honest, and I can trust people and understand and do things. Like I said, I'm very demanding with Mike Garcia. I'm a little, maybe, stupid, a little – you know, I'm here every day at 6:00 in the morning. The only day I'm not here is Sunday because I go to church.

Every Sunday I go to a 6:30 in the morning Mass. I still do the collection from the church. That's the only day I'm not here at 6:00 in the morning. And everybody said, "You gotta be dumb."

I said, "Well, but I'm happy."

I'll read my newspaper. Nobody bothers me. I watch television. Nobody bothers me, and I got restaurants all over. Thank God. And I'm here. I always – somebody call me – one of my kids or one of my friends, and I thank to the good Lord.

KN: Do you have any final thoughts?

MG: I'm sorry?

KN: Final thoughts about your business or –?

MG: Well, I hope, when the good Lord wants me, I'm still here. But no, I'm just gonna keep on as long as he let me do my thing. I said it won't be long. This person, this friend of mine, he asked me, "Are you ready to die?"

And I said, "I knew you were a fool, but not stupid. Who do you think is ready to die? Nobody. But whenever the good Lord wants to, ready or not, here's you go."

And I pray to God that – you know what I mean? Like my kids said, I keep telling me kids, "When I go, have one on me, and thank to the good Lord. Pray for me."

KN: Thank you, Mr. Garcia.

MG: Thank you.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 64 minutes

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