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Lisa Herrera

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University of Texas at El Paso

Institute of Oral History

Interviewee: Lisa Herrera

Interviewer: Arlina Palacios

Project: Paso del Norte Entrepreneurship Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: 14 September 2010

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Biographical Synopsis of Interviewee: Lisa Herrera was born in El Paso, Texas and is the youngest of eight children. Her mother Edlinda ran a bridal shop and her father Leonardo ran a motel. She attended Cooley Elementary, Ross School and Burgess High School. She married and has three children. Lisa is the founder and owner of Corporate Connections in El Paso, Texas.

Summary of Interview: Lisa got her start in selling retail with her mother and sister who owned and ran a local bridal shop. Lisa's father also ran a motel and did most of the work at the motel himself. Lisa learned how to manage a business and the work ethic that goes with it from watching her parents run their businesses. Later while Lisa worked at a boutique she was approached by local business woman Joanne Wardy to sell corporations gifts for their company. Lisa got into the business and with the help of her husband she was able to grow slowly and successfully. Lisa established Corporate Connections in El Paso Texas, Salt Lake City Utah and Rio Rancho New Mexico. Corporate Connections provides quality corporate apparel and promotional products that are tailored to that specific corporation. The advice Lisa would offer entrepreneurs is to have a solid business plan that can provide a great sound board for the business. Also Lisa advises entrepreneurs to get involved with their local chamber of commerce and other organizations that can assist in creating a business and networking the business. In addition, Lisa states that it is crucial to find a niche and find out how to market that niche.

Length of interview: 77 minutes

Length of Transcript: 27 pages

Name of Interviewee: Lisa Herrera
Date of Interview: September 14th, 2010
Name of Interviewer: Arlina Palacios

AP: Today is September 14, 2010. This is an interview with Lisa Herrera, the owner of Corporate Connections in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Arlina Palacios. This interview is part of Paso Del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project. Good Morning, Ms. Herrera.

LH: Good morning.

AP: How are you?

LH: I'm good, thank you, and thank you all for coming and visiting me today.

AP: Thanks for having us. To start off, I'd like to have you state your name just for the record, and the name of your business.

LH: Lisa Herrera, Corporate Connection.

AP: Okay. And I want some background information about you. Let's start off with when and where were you born?

LH: Here in El Paso, Texas at Thomason.

AP: Really?

LH: Yes, I was actually the only one of my mother's children born in a hospital. They were all born by midwife at home. So the fact that I was born at Thomason, they always remind me.

AP: So you were hospital born?

LH: Yes.

AP: Well, tell me about it.

LH: I'm actually the youngest of eight children, and my mother and father, I'm amazed by them. I have three children and I know how hard it is, but my mother and father had eight, all of which are educated. Some have been business owners. And all still married.

AP: Wow. So how many brothers and sisters do you have?

LH: There's five girls, three boys.

AP: Five girls, three boys.

LH: Uh-huh.

AP: And you're the youngest one?

LH: And I'm the youngest.

AP: And where were your parents from?

LH: Actually, they were from here. Yeah, my grandfather was from Anapra, but he – my grandfather owned businesses. He owned – my grandfather's very, very hard working on my father's side – both of them. But my grandfather bought property, worked very, very hard, saved money, bought property out on Alameda by Fox Plaza. He actually owned a motel back when the motels were really the only place that you could stay while traveling. There weren't hotels back then. And it was called Papagallo It was on Alameda. There's a Chase Bank building there now. My father sold it.

But my grandfather owned that property. They bought another property, and my dad owned a bar and a restaurant there. So I've only always known my parents to be in business. My mother owned two bridal shops at one time. She owned them for quite a number of years; I'm thinking 25, and they were very successful. My sister would design dresses and brides would come from the interior of Mexico to come have a dress designed by her.

AP: So your mom owned a bridal

LH: Yes, my mom and my sister, they owned two bridal shops. And like I said, my father owned his bar and his restaurant. In the later years, when I was in high school, he converted them to apartments. I was thinking about this interview yesterday, and I was thinking about, I guess, where it came from because for me it came naturally to go into business for myself, and I've never thought that it would be difficult for other people.

AP: Uh-huh.

LH: But I started thinking about that, and I started thinking that it came from my parents. My mom would always say – if we stood in the

kitchen like this, she'd say [**Spanish**], and my dad would say [**Spanish**], you don't have to go look for it, it's here, it's in your hands. And I remember from a very young age, if my mom – I mean my parents, believe me – with eight children, and my dad worked for my grandfather. In other words, he never had really control of the money.

AP: This is the continuation of the interview with Lisa Herrera of Corporate Connections. Ms. Herrera, I wanted to ask you, what are your parent's names?

LH: My mother's Erlina Harnan Duran and my father is Leonardo [Duran].

AP: You mentioned the business that your father was in. Tell me more about what your father did.

LH: Well, like I said, my father worked for my grandfather as did some of his other children. And together, they bought property, they built up, literally by hand, the adobes that made what would later become my father's restaurant and bar, and that building, in itself, has so much history because it's been converted so many times to different businesses. At one time, it housed my mother's bridal shop, and then later was converted to apartments, and back into a business, back into apartments. So it's provided income for three generations of my family.

AP: And where was this located?

LH: That is on Glenwood, so right in the heart of the [**inaudible**]. That's where I grew up. The other property that my father was part owner of with my aunt was, like I said, on Alameda, kind of right Alameda and Glenwood, and it was a motel called the Papagallo. So I spent my summers growing up there in the pool, and watching my dad work, watching how hard my dad worked, very, very, very hard. My dad didn't believe in leisure time. He wasn't a leisure man. He wasn't really good at family picnics or going to visit or Sunday afternoon drives. My dad worked everyday, Monday through Sunday, never took a day off, never took vacation, very hard working.

AP: Tell me about what he did there. What were his duties?

LH: Basically, everything. He'd run the motel during the day, and then my aunt lived on the property. She would take it over, and he would come to the bar at night and run that, so he worked very,

very long hours. At the motel, I watched him do everything. He cleaned the rooms, he maintained the grounds, cleaned the pool, and took care of the guests. So my father's work ethic was incredible. And equally, my mothers. My mother, like I said, I come from a family of eight children, so my mother had so many duties as a mother, but she always had that business sense about her.

Her mother, my grandmother, owned a little store, kind of like a neighborhood store, and so she sold everything that you'd need on a daily basis, candy, bread, that sort of stuff. My mom would always tell me stories about how my grandmother would never sit around with her arms crossed. If there was a need for her children, whether they needed new clothes, or food, whatever it was that she started making burritos, she would do whatever she had to do, and I saw my mother do the same growing up.

We had that little restaurant. It wasn't a big restaurant. There was a few booths and we did candy apples, we did burritos, we did hotdogs. The faro factory at that time when it was open was very close to us, and so we would sell lunch to all the workers, even as kids. My mom would make it, and we'd run out there and just start selling.

AP: This is you and your brothers?

LH: My brothers and – yeah, my brothers and my sisters, that's what we did. So it was no unusual for us to always be selling something. So when I got married, that was just kind of the norm for me, too. Whatever we needed, whether it was like a new bedroom set for the kids, or a couch, I thought well, what could I sell, what can I do.

AP: So tell me about your childhood more and growing up in the area. Did you attend school there?

LH: Uh-huh. I went to **Cooley** Elementary, and then from there that's when they started bussing students, so instead of going to Henderson and Jeff like my brothers and sisters did, I was bussed to Ross and Burgess, so I graduated from Burgess High School. My father was really strict and he kept a really good watch over us, so we weren't really – I mean when we weren't doing what we weren't supposed to do, in other words, and he kept my brothers always working. My brothers learned every type of construction. From when they were really, really young, he would take them to work with him, and they can fix and build just about anything.

And my mother had that mentality a little bit that we were too – even though she was always – she had an entrepreneurial spirit about her, she was always about making a home, and about serving my brothers, making sure they were fed, and making sure their clothes were washed, and making sure that they were taken care of first because they went out and worked for my dad. So it was one big family effort, right, at that time.

AP: And what was it that your mom did at the bridal?

LH: Well, my sister started taking classes, floral arrangement classes, and she had a natural talent for it, so she started doing wedding bouquets, and boutonnieres, and corsages, and this sort of stuff, and that just grew and grew and grew and grew into – she started making church arrangements, you know, huge church arrangements for weddings. You know when they'd put the arch up with the beautiful flower arrangements, and she worked with fresh and silk flowers. And so that just grew to wedding dresses, shoes, veils, and she started designing, like I said, and it was very successful.

And when I was in high school and for about seven years after I was married, I married right out of high school, I worked for my mother in the bridal stores.

AP: What did you do there?

LH: Mostly sales, but just about everything that needed to be done. I dyed shoes. At that time, it was very popular to dye your shoes to match your bridesmaid's dresses. We did all hand beading, so I would hand bead. But mostly selling. That's kind of been my thing.

AP: Was that a family effort as well?

LH: It was a family effort. I guess everybody at one time had a little something to do with it. My brothers did construction whenever the stores needed remodeling. My sister did bookkeeping at one time. I did sales. The sister that owned it designed the dresses. And my mother did just about everything, too, just a little bit of [inaudible]. And so I learned so much from just watching my mom. People loved her, loved, loved, loved her.

AP: Yeah.

LH: Yeah. She had a way of making you feel really, really comfortable, and you could really trust her. You felt that you could really trust her and that she had your best interests at heart, and that she was giving you the best value for your money. So that work ethic also came from her.

AP: And do you know how she did that? Was it just –

LH: Like I said, I think she – when I thought about it last night when you had asked me that question about where that inspiration came from, she must've learned that from her mother, her mother having that little neighborhood store. And her mother was a widow at a very young age, in her mid-20s I'm thinking, maybe 30, and so she had to provide for her family, and that's the way that she did it. She canned all kinds of fruits and she sold them in her store. So my mom must've learned it from her, and I, in turn, from my mother and my father.

AP: What was your grandmother's name, you mom's mom?

LH: Erlinda

AP: Erlinda?

LH: Erlinda. My mother's named after her.

AP: And your father's father?

LH: Leonardo. Yes, so I guess that's where I got that from, and that wanting to do something on my own, although I never dreamed that it would be this, but working and earning money for myself I think was always just part of who I was that just came naturally.

AP: And how was it being bussed from your neighborhood to Burgess? Tell me about that.

LH: Well, that environment's very different from where I grew up. The kids had money, and they had cars, and they had clothes, so it was quite – I mean I grew up in **[Spanish]**. And like I said, even though my parents had these businesses, by no means were we – we had food on the table, but by no means were we probably even middle class. It was very difficult. There was a lot of kids, and my dad worked very hard, but there were a lot of expenses in the businesses and in the properties.

AP: So did you see a difference in your siblings thinking about school and yours because you went to different schools, or did they tell you anything about the fact that you were going to Burgess and not to Jeff, for example?

LH: Not so much in high school. But what was instilled very, very early on was education. So my sister, Linda, my grandparents, at that time, sent her to Laredo, and she was the only one that went to Laredo. I don't think that they had thought my mom was gonna have so many kids, so they were thinking she has two, we can send them to Laredo, but once she had eight, no. My oldest sister that went to Laredo, and she was the first one to go onto college, and she got a teaching degree. And after that, it was the older siblings just impressed it on the younger ones, and really just pushed.

I remember my brother putting me in the car and taking me to [inaudible] and showing me around and saying you can do this. I think about that a lot and I think about those disadvantages neighborhoods, and how fortunate I was in that my brothers and my sisters really paved that road and showed me what was possible, and showed me that with effort and hard work, anything is possible. It just has to come from in here.

AP: Give me the names of your siblings, I didn't ask you, and what they do now.

LH: Linda, the first one, also named after my mother, Edlinda, she lives in Houston. She substitute teaches now. She's 60 now; I tease her about that. My second oldest sister is actually a Missionary. She lives in Spain; she's lived there for 15 years. She is an inspiration in herself because she contracted polio as a young girl, as a child really; I think she was only three when she contracted polio, which left her paralyzed from the waist down. And so at that time, they didn't know where it came from, or they didn't know that it was permanent, that it wasn't something that so many children would be, that it was such an epidemic; they didn't know that at this time.

So my parents struggled in vain to try to heal her, to try to find a doctor that could help her. But however, she was paralyzed in the end. But they did a wonderful thing in that they never treated her different from the rest of us. And she had that fighting spirit that never allowed her – anyone to feel sorry for her. She would get so angry if she fell down and you tried to help her up; she would be furious at you. And I think at one point, my mom probably worried about if she'd be married, if she'd have children, if she'd have the same life that the rest of us had the opportunity to have.

And she absolutely if not has had that, has had so much more. She's traveled everywhere around the world. She has three beautiful children, all grown. She lives in Spain by the coast. She's had an incredible story. But you know, again, at school, just the love of a father, my dad – it would snow back then. Climate has changed so much now, but at that time, it would snow and I remember driving with my dad to take her to [inaudible], he would literally put her on his shoulder and carry her to class. Yeah. So it's an incredible story, my sister.

So whenever I wanna feel sorry for myself or say – I think of her, and I think that she's overcome so much, and nothing has stopped her; nothing.

AP: So you went to UTIP with your dad and your sister to take her?

LH: To take her. And I saw what my dad would go through just to get her to school. And then I think, you know, we complain about walking anywhere, and she had to do it on crutches and with a backpack, or her books. So that's my second oldest sister. The third one is the one that owned the bridal shops. After she sold the business, she's worked for non-profits, and she's been happier, I think, working in non-profits. She was happy doing the business, and then that ran its course and had it's time. Concentrating now on her grandkids.

And my brother, Leo, is an engineer. Lives in Virginia. He married a wonderful gal that actually works for the Department of Education in Washington D.C. My second oldest brother's an engineer, and he works for the Water and Boundary Commission. My third brother works for Freeport, that used to be [inaudible], he's been there for years. My sister actually has a Masters degree in human resource, Grace. So they've held the bar pretty high.

AP: Did they all go to UTIP?

LH: Yes.

AP: All of them?

LH: I think my brother, George, probably not, but the rest of them, yes.

AP: Wow.

LH: Yeah.

AP: So tell me a little bit more about your education and how you feel that your siblings helped pave the way for you. Tell me more about that.

LH: Well, just like I said, I think that they just impressed it upon me how important it was, and how anything was possible no matter the circumstances. No matter where you came from or how much money you had that there's always help available, and grants, and financial aid, and ways to get it done if you really wanna get it done. And they just kept on it. And I think just seeing what was possible, and I think that's true for every child, just seeing what's possible.

AP: What did you study at UTIP?

LH: Well, everything. For the longest time, I wanted to be a journalist, and I had my sights set on being an anchor person, and so I'd spend so much time in front of the mirror just practicing, just reading off of whatever I could find in English and in Spanish. So I'm really good at reading Spanish, but terrible at writing it, and not so good at speaking it. I thought well, if I can speak really well in Spanish, it'll just give me that much more advantage. But then later I changed to business, and it's been an ongoing – I think that not ever stopping the learning process because everything continues to change and grow and you need to stay ahead of the curve.

So if there's a class, I'll take it. If there's something that I know will benefit my business or just personal development – I love going back to school.

AP: So you still –

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AP: So you still –

LH: Yeah, the SBA has been offering – you know they offer so many classes for business owners and even second stage business owners, and I think it's so important to take advantage of that because you're hit with so many different obstacles along the way that once you're faced with a new problem, and you haven't really dealt with it before then you need to learn how to get yourself through it.

AP: What year did you graduate from UTIP?

LH: I haven't yet.

AP: You haven't yet, so you're there.

LH: I think I'm four classes away.

AP: Oh, wow. Almost there.

LH: Yeah.

AP: So tell me a little bit more about how you – well, tell me about how you started this business. What was it that motivated you to start a business?

LH: Necessity, actually, and I think that probably motivates a lot of people, just a need. That's an interesting story because I – like I said, I worked for my mom, and then I went to work in a boutique. I worked there for, gosh, I'm thinking maybe seven or eight years.

Always in retail, and I'd had – I married out of high school, had my two kids. By this time, I'm thinking they must've been about seven or eight years old, and my husband wanted a baby, and I just said these two poor kids have been raised in daycare and I just don't wanna do that again; I don't wanna do it to a third one.

So at that time, Joanne Wardy owned kind of a home and gift store on Mesa, and because she knew that I was working in this boutique that was close to her store, and she would come in, she was a customer, and I guess knew that I had a little bit of selling skill, asked me – she says, you know, there's a lot of companies that like to give gifts to their management at Christmas. So she says do you mind – do you wanna try this and I'll pay you a commission, and so I said sure. So the first time I went out, I sold \$10,000.00. But when I'd go – because they were beautiful gifts.

They were like leather attachés and some Mont Blanc pens and she had some beautiful things, desk accessories, letter openers, business card holders. When I would go present these gifts to businesses, mostly corporate businesses, they would say well, can you put our logo on it, or can you engrave it, or can you – we just don't wanna give it to them like that, we wanna have it personalized. So I'd run to the engraver, I'd find a screen printer, I'd have to do whatever I could to get these gifts personalized.

And then they started asking for pens, and do you do pens, and do you do mugs, and do you do this, calendars, and things like this. And so it got me on the track to thinking well, if that's what they're asking for then I need to fill that need somehow. And coincidentally, my husband just started working for Kellogg's, the cereal company, and because he worked for Kellogg's, they would give us so many of these promotional gifts. I had all kinds of stuff in the closet. I had mugs, and water bottles, and towels, and stadium seat cushions, and I just loved getting all this promo stuff you know. It was free, and you could use it.

And so the two just kind of came together. I said obviously there's huge companies like Kellogg's that are buying this type of product, and I'm out here selling these business gifts, and they're asking me for this type of product, so maybe this is something I should look into. And like I said, my husband wanted to have a baby, so I said the only way that I'll do that, I'll agree is if I can stay home and try something on my own, and have my baby next to me, raise him, take care of him, and be there. So my husband agreed.

Funny thing about that was that I'd gone off to Las Vegas. I found the industry that supports this market, and I'd gone to Las Vegas. Actually, interestingly, I had gone to the wrong show. The show that I ended up at was kind of a show that sells to like dollar stores, so it's a bunch of closeouts and overstocks, and these companies go and it's kind of dollar store merchandise. But there was one promotional products company there, and so I went up to them and I said I wanna get into this industry, and I just don't know how to do it.

And she says well, we're here selling our surplus, but I'll give you one of our catalogs, and she says and I'll give you the number to the industry and you can call them when you get back and figure that out. So that catalog – I had already set up appointments, so I needed something to sell. So I brought that catalog back, took it to my appointment, again, sold in the thousands. I don't remember how much it was, but it was actually to a manufacturing plant that wanted to do like a plant wide giveaway.

Next thing I think about is I come home, I'm really excited, and I say oh, I did this, but where am I gonna get the money from now. I had no plan. I hadn't – I mean I had planned on getting into the industry, but I really hadn't set up shop. I'd gone and done my assumed name and that sort of stuff, and my sales tax, but up to that point, I hadn't done much else. So again, I go to my husband and I say sweetie, you know that big bonus check that you just got, I need it, and he turned it over. And at that time, bonuses were big, not like now, but he'd been working for Kellogg's for a few years, and so no questions asked, he turned it over.

Didn't ask me are you sure you know what you're doing, when do I get it back, nothing, and at that time we were saving for a house, so I was really apprehensive about – not that I couldn't do it, but just that I had to ask him for it because I knew how hard he had worked for it, so I've credited him with that so many times. Because you need to somebody to really – if somebody's gonna turn over \$10,000.00 of their hard earned money, they have faith.

AP: So he turned over a \$10,000.00?

LH: He turned over \$10,000.00. Like I said, I really – other than doing the preliminary stuff, wasn't really sure what I was doing, so I pulled it off. And he had to finance me a couple of times after that until the business got going. You don't start off with credit, and manufacturers wanna see that you've paid them three orders before

you can apply for credit and before they start lending you money. So it takes capital that I didn't have at that time.

AP: And what motivated you to go to Las Vegas?

LH: I heard – at that time, the industry, the promotional products industry and the corporate apparel industry wasn't as structured as it is today. There's an association now. A lot of suppliers from all over the country are part of this association, so distributors, like myself, are able to join, and it simplifies things, makes it really easy. There's a rating between suppliers and distributors, lots of structure. Back then, not so much. It was really just getting started, so I had really not heard that I could become a member of an association. And at that time, you have to think about it. It was 1995, there wasn't all the internet resources that there are today.

I remember needed a supplier for a certain product and actually going to the library and looking at the Thomas Guide. Do you know what the Thomas Guide is? It's kind of like an encyclopedia style reference of volumes that have manufacturers in them. So I'd have to go and spend hours at the library going through the Thomas Guides, no internet, looking for who would produce coffee mugs, or who would produce key chains, or – those things are kind of simple, but various other things. It was a process.

Once the internet came and the industry grew and it became more structured, that was – for people coming into this industry now, I'm amazed at how easy it is for them. Selling is never easy, but there's just so many resources now. There's even seminars now on who to sell to, how to sell to them, what they're buying, what the overall nationally – the figure that they're purchasing in any given segment. What the car industry is buying as far as promotional products go, the pharmaceutical industry. So if you wanna pursue one of those industries, one of those niches, there's statistics, there's everything now available that there wasn't back then.

AP: You wanted to be a stay at home mom, is that what initially you planned?

LH: Yes, I wanted to have flexibility, and I wanted to be able to do something from home. My husband also worked from home, so he was an account rep in the beginning for a chain of grocery stores. Like I said, he worked for Kellogg's, and then later it was States. So after I had been in business for just a few years, he actually got promoted and he got transferred to Salt Lake City, so we had to move. And I had already built up some really good accounts here,

and I was doing really well, so a good girlfriend of mine – I said I just started this and I don't wanna lose these accounts, I said why don't you take over and when I get to Salt Lake City, I'll start there, and we'll work together.

And so that's what I did. She maintained corporate connection here. I got to Utah and I started there again. So I went out, looked for accounts, and it actually went very, very well there for me because a lot of what we sell is – well, I do a lot with Fort Bliss here, but in Utah I did a lot with companies that worked for the government, and they're required to give so much of their business to women and minorities. Well, here, there are a lot of women in business that are minorities. In Utah, not so much, so it came easier for me there.

And of course, their economy's better, there's more money, there's more growth, so there was a lot more corporate headquarters in Salt Lake City, so it was easier to go out and get accounts there, and I was actually very surprised at how well I did.

AP: So tell me a little bit about your start up plan. What was it? When you started the business, you saw the need?

LH: Uh-huh.

AP: But besides the financing from your husband, did you have to go out and get a loan?

LH: No, I think that that – my thinking now is very different from when I started. I could hear my father in my head at that time – my father was always like you don't get in debt, you grow slowly, and you own everything, and my thinking's different now. But at that time, no. So I started off with a loan from my husband, and after that, I didn't keep anything for myself, or I kept very little, and I just kept building the business that way, just saving, financing the next job, and so forth. So I never really needed financing probably until now. I've always just been able to manage doing it on my own other than credit cards maybe, you know, and paying those off, and building it that way. But no major financing until now, no.

AP: And where was your business located when you first started?

LH: When I first started, it was home. Like I said, my husband worked from home so it was really – he traveled a lot, but it was convenient that we were both there, and he did all of the

bookkeeping, so it was good for both of us. And we worked that way for many years, maybe 10, 12 years until he passed away.

AP: Sorry to hear that. Did you have your third child?

LH: Yes, in high school now. And that's one thing I'm really grateful for is that decision and that motivator to stay home and be with him; one decision I won't regret is taking that leap of faith and starting something on my own, and him being the motivator to do that.

AP: What are the ages of your children? How old are they?

LH: Jeremy is 24, Laura is 23, and the little one, Edgar, is 17 now.

AP: So how long have you been in business?

LH: I think this is my sixteenth year. So I started really shortly after I had him, you know, where it really got going.

AP: And tell me more about the family support that you got at the onset of the business. How were your children when it came to seeing mom starting a business and running it from home?

LH: You know I think that that probably didn't – I don't probably think they thought it was that big of a deal actually. I think maybe now they – now because wherever we go we see something that Corporate Connection has produced, rather we're at a restaurant, or at UTIP, or my youngest son that we do a lot of his high school. So I think now that – sometimes commercials on TV where people are wearing our uniforms or major events that are advertised that we've done promotional product for. I think now they see more of the impact.

As a matter of fact, my son who's getting a finance degree now is starting to give me advice, you know, mom, you should try this segment, or you should do this, or have you thought about your next move financially and that maybe if you – I mean of course we've outgrown this location so I talk to him a little bit about the next move, and the next building, and my vision for that. So I think now. Back then it was just I was just mom.

AP: Yeah.

LH: You know just mom. Still just mom.

AP: So tell me about your store. Tell me about the products, the service that you provide. Tell me about that.

LH: Oh, promotional products are so – I mean first of all, I love what I do. And like I was telling you before, there isn't an industry that doesn't use what we can produce. A lot of people just see it – and I think the industry is really starting to change that because they used to see it as, and there's all kinds of little words, or like giveaways or novelty items, but promotional products motivate so they're used as employee recognition. If you're getting an award, a beautiful pen set, a jacket – they also promote safety, so we do a lot of safety incentives, so plants, if you've got 30 days without an accident, there's some type of incentive there, and that saves companies a lot of money in injuries and insurance costs.

So it's important for them to promote safety. Service awards. If you've been with a company 5, 10, 15 years and you're receiving some type of recognition for that, again, a coaster, a beautiful mug set, a glass crystal marble award. And then of course, just the whole – and trade shows because you're promoting your business and you're getting your name out there and you're keeping your name in front of someone because they have a mug sitting on their desk or they're writing with a pen that has your number and your website on it.

And I always tell my customers that we place an ad in the paper and we see it that day; it goes in the trash the next. If you give somebody a mug, they're gonna use it for a year. They're gonna see your name and your logo and your contact information every day. So I think promotional products – and there's such a need in just about every industry for them.

AP: You mentioned Joanne Wardy. Would you consider her a driving force, or who do you consider to be your mentors in terms of starting your own business that kinda led you in that direction, or was it just all on your own?

LH: Well, no. Like I said, I mean I think the main reason was to be able to earn money and stay with my son, which I think any woman is capable of doing. If our children are important to us and we really wanna be there for them, there's a million ways to earn a living. I don't think that we should ever feel that we aren't capable of doing both. And I think that when you start anything with a mission and a purpose, and mine was to be at home with my son, with my kids, you're gonna see it through. You know because

after I was with him, there was no way I was gonna go back to working holidays and weekends and punching a clock somewhere.

He became much more important than – and I was out to prove that hey, I can still be here and I can still bring home a paycheck.

AP: Were there any obstacles that you faced?

LH: Oh, gosh, I think anybody that is in business for themselves has seen just about every obstacle. I mean there's always financing. We, as business owners, I think is when we're starting off a business, we try to wear all those different hats.

AP: This continues the interview with Lisa Herrera, Corporate Connections. You were telling me about obstacles that you face.

LH: Obstacles. So many, and probably every one that every other business owner faces. There's financing, and like I said, we're trying, in the beginning, to wear so many different hats. We're trying to be marketers of our own business. We're trying to be bookkeepers. We're trying to grow the business. We're trying to learn more about our product. And we're trying to be the one person on the sales force. So in the beginning, it's really difficult to get all of that going.

Along the way, there's other issues that come up. Sometimes you're – one that I'm facing now is that we're growing so fast, which is another capital. We need more capital; we need a bigger building, so we probably could use another person on the sales team. So I think along the way we face so many. Advertising, how do you advertise? Where's the best place to put your advertising dollar? And even though that's what I'm doing, that's kind of the business that I'm in, it's still how do I get myself out there, and how do I put myself in front of those clients that I really need to see.

AP: So what avenues have you taken to put yourself out there? Have you joined any –

LH: I think that's so important. I think that you really need to keep a public presence. You really need to join and be part of the community, be on boards, volunteer, be an advocate for your fellow women business owners because women really support each other. I think that we're starting to learn that from the way men do it, which is really interesting because there's such a difference in the way that men and women do business. So I think that we're

really starting to learn that, and we're starting to be each other's advocates in business.

And thank goodness from a very – from the very beginning, I knew a lot of people in the community, and so I really relied on them. I relied on my friends and I relied on their friends, and I was never afraid to say hey, I know that you know so and so, do you think that you could give them a call for me, let them know a little bit what I do, and then I'll follow up and I'll try to get an appointment. Because we can advertise all the live long day long but it's really about building a relationship because they don't know you and they don't know that they can trust you. If an event is pending on you making them – producing product, having it there delivered on time, having it printed properly, correctly, they're not just gonna trust that to just someone that walks in the door.

They need – and that's true with any business I think. You need to build a relationship, and get those referrals, and ask for referrals. So I think my personal relationships and pursuing them and business relationships have really, really helped me.

AP: You mentioned the differences between how men and women do business. What do you think those differences are?

LH: Well, for one thing, I'll tell you it's ten times harder to sell to a woman than it is to a man. Men are quick decision makers. They'll tell you what they need and they want yes, I can do it, and this is how much I can do it for, and this is when I can have it done. Women, they're very detail oriented, and they wanna make sure that everything is in line. they'll pour over the color and how's it gonna be printed and can I see a proof and can you sew me out one of the uniforms before I make my final decision and can you get me a run of sizes. And men will call and say I need five large, three medium, and ten extra large. Women won't do that.

And I think that men – what women fail to realize, I think, was that men build relationships, they build camaraderie, they help each other, they send each other business, they rely on each other, they call each other up when they need each other. Women, we tend to be very guarded and protective. This is what I've built. I'm not gonna reach out to another woman to collaborate with me. But that's changing now. We're realizing that we need to do business more the way men do business on the golf course.

We come to work and we're so focused. They have a more relaxed approach to it. But also, they're tougher. They're more – I think they think more about the bottom line, the margin, and women need to start thinking more about that.

AP: What challenges have you faced, or have you seen any differences in how business is conducted with you because you're a woman and a minority?

LH: Absolutely. I think that like I said, if you – you know if I walk in – and a lot of times I have to present to like a committee, there's always a committee decision. You can see the differences in the questions asked by the women on the committee as opposed to the men. I've noticed also that if I go on a sales call by myself, and let's say it's a manager supervisor, he's a little leery because I'm a woman. Can I pull it off? Can I handle it? Do I know what I'm doing? And I think that's changing, but I still see it.

AP: Was it worse when you started, or is it about the same? How was it when you started compared to how it is now?

LH: I think it was harder just getting started partially probably just because I didn't have as much experience as I do now, and I wasn't as comfortable as I am now at the first no, or being questioned, or can you produce this, how's it produced, when is it getting done as I am now. You know now I'll be much more straightforward; no, that can't be done by then. This is what it's gonna take, and this is a process, and more about educating my customer, but I still feel that it takes a little bit more to win a man's business over. Women are tougher in that it takes longer, but I think that things are definitely changing.

AP: And the difference is in that aspect between El Paso and Utah? Were there any differences?

LH: Oh, absolutely. You know in Utah, three percent of the population make up the minority, which includes not only Hispanics but blacks and every other minority; three percent of the entire population at that time. So it was very intimidating to me. I'd never been out of El Paso, Texas. I'd never lived anywhere else, so it was a very big challenge. I mean just building a business and then being in an environment where I truly was a minority, but I think that I threw myself into naively, and thank goodness that the outcome was a good one, and it made me grow in ways that I probably wouldn't have had I stayed here.

AP: Such as?

LH: I was able to see the potential in the industry and in what I was doing because there was just, like I said, the budgets were bigger, and I could see really – it motivated me to keep going because I could see really that it was viable, it was profitable. And it put me in that uncomfortable situation of having to sit across from someone that I had really never done business with before, and that was a white male. It's one thing being here and sitting across from a Hispanic, but – and he had never been in front of a Hispanic woman, so being put in that situation, it's either do or die.

So I think that really, really made me grow. It made me stronger. It made me think about you can't approach everyone with the same sales tactic.

AP: Did you build a network in Utah?

LH: Absolutely, and like I told you, it went really, really well for me there. After that, my husband – after we were there for three years, my husband was transferred again to – got a promotion and was transferred again to New Mexico. And so we were living right outside of Albuquerque in a little town, Rio Rancho.

AP: Uh-huh.

LH: And Intel was big there. And so when we got there, I set my sights on Intel. I did a lot with U and M, and again, I just built up a network of clients, and it went well there. New Mexico has its struggles, but it went well for me there. And I had so much more experience and so it wasn't difficult to get started. And I managed to keep my customers, some of my customers from Utah. Over the years, now, very few because there's always competition knocking on the door, and I think had I tried harder, I probably could've made more frequent trips there and that sort of thing. But like I said, my husband, by that time, was really ill and so the time that we spent in New Mexico was really caring about him.

I was his caregiver. We were there for three years, and when he got really ill we came home. He wanted me to be home with my family, so we moved back to El Paso, and he passed away within months of coming home. After that, I had to rely on Corporate Connection, so it had to work. We didn't have that nice cushiony income anymore that my husband provided because he made a nice living for us. We had a lot of medical bills, and they had to be paid. The kids were in high school, the older two, getting ready for

college. We hadn't saved too much for that, so it really had to work.

And so from that standpoint, that's what really got me going. I invested in my own machines. Prior to that, I had been contracting out that work, but I felt that I had built up the business enough that they could be running, I could keep them running. And I had to have more control, you know. I couldn't be running to a contractor anymore. And that grew the business tremendously. And I really had to look inward and rely on my own ability, which was really scary at that point in my life, very scary.

AP: Would you like to discuss how you came up with the idea to buy your own machines? Was it out of necessity, or what was it that – I know that they cost of contracting out, but to just buy your own machines. How did you do that?

LH: You know at that time, we were – the business had grown to the point where I was at the contractors if not every day, every other day, and that was cutting into running the business time, just going and checking on orders, picking them up, making sure they were delivered, and I just came to the point where that couldn't go on anymore. I had to bring it in-house, and I needed to have more control. I couldn't keep calling and saying well, how does it look, and how did it turn out. Or he'd call, I'm having trouble with this logo, or that just couldn't go on anymore, so it was really just – it had to happen.

It was probably one of the biggest investments that I made, but I really wasn't worried about it at that point because I knew that we had enough business to sustain them, and thank goodness, at this point, they're almost paid off. It's been three years. I think every business owner feels when that change has to happen. It's weighing down on you, and it's just something that needs to happen. And I feel that again now, that looking ahead, and projecting, which is something that I really didn't do in the beginning because we had that nice income from my husband, and I could relax, and I could take the business at it's pace.

Although, I don't know that I ever – I was always motivated to help him and turn money, and I enjoyed it, so I don't know that I ever really took it slowly. But now, I don't have that option, that luxury. I have employees, we have the overhead, I have two kids in college, so its' about running the business everyday now.

AP: You talked about joining different groups and being active in the community. What groups are you a member of?

LH: You know that's something that I think I've always enjoyed just because I'm a people person. I mean I'm a member of some of the women business organizations, and also through the Chamber.

AP: The El Paso?

LH: The El Paso, the greater Chamber, the e-women network. I also do the **I-Fem**, so booster, man booster at my son's school, just all kinds of organizations, and there's business to be had everywhere. No matter what organization that you're part of – and my mother always taught me a lesson. She always said wherever you are and whatever you're doing, you're selling. So whenever I'm having a conversation with someone, and they say during that conversation oh, my brother works at Boeing, or my dad runs a coffee shop downtown, or whatever it is, I'm always really keen to pick up on that because that's a potential sale.

AP: And this is something that your mother would tell you?

LH: All the time. She would say wherever you are and whatever you're doing, you're selling, and it's so true. I don't think that there's a person that I've met that I haven't seen – that I haven't thought to myself how can I get a sale out of this person, who do they know. And I say that, but I don't want it to sound as though I'm seeing dollar signs all the time. but you have to listen to – first of all, you have to build that network and you have to surround yourself with the people that can take you there by joining those organizations because you're not – when I'm networking with someone, I'm not just networking with you, I'm networking with everyone that you know.

AP: And so do you think that the Chamber of Commerce has been beneficial in terms of getting to know more people in the business sector here in El Paso?

LH: Absolutely. I think everyone should be active in the Chamber. After a while, it gets tough to be dividing your time aside from running a business to organizations, but you have to keep a social presence, a public presence. I know that a lot of what's grown my business, too, is just donating to the Y, to different organizations that are my customers because you're helping each other.

AP: And what business advice, or what advice, period, would you give to somebody who is starting a business or thinking of starting a business?

LH: Not to do it the way I did it. I think first of all, you really need to create a business plan. I had a vision of what I wanted, which is why I named the business Corporate Connection because I know that I wanted corporate accounts. I knew that that's where the money was. I wanted to create an atmosphere where you're walking in and you're not just seeing coffee mugs, you're walking in and you're seeing an agency or a company that can brand your company, that can make your company stand out, and I wasn't gonna do that by calling it your logo here, or something like that.

I mean I knew that I wanted to go after corporate accounts. I had a vision of who I wanted my customer to be, and I think that's important, too, where the money is, and to build, and to really write it all out. Write up that business plan, plan it out. And even in the second stage of your business because you need a map, you need to know where you're going. And to take advantage of all the help that the SBA offers. There's classes on every subject. There's help. To take advantage of what the Chamber offers. Get involved. Build a network.

I know one thing that I really did right when I was first starting out was I had heard that I need to start with what I know, so I knew a little bit about this. Not a whole lot, but I knew who I wanted to sell to, so I got out pen and paper and I wrote down I want this account, and this account, and this account, and this account. I set out to find out what they buy and what they buy it for. And that's where I started. And I'll still even do that today. I set my sights on a company either by doing research on the internet or just by calling, or finding someone that works there. I start asking questions so that I know a little bit more about them and what their needs are, and I can meet them.

And when you walk in and you say I know that you do this, I know that you have these certain events this time of the year and you need to promote them, and this is how I think I can help you, you're so much more prepared. So I know that I started with that.

AP: So you didn't have a business plan, but you would tell people have one?

LH: Absolutely have one. Absolutely have one.

AP: Do you have one now?

LH: I have one now. I'm working on one now because I think that I am – like I said, we need to grow. I do have one now.

AP: And is your business –

LH: I also think that was very beneficial and it would work for most businesses is I took a franchise class. Well, at one time I was thinking of franchising Corporate Connection. Still part of the plan may be down the road. But learning the way that franchises work and how they're structured I think is beneficial to any business. There's a procedure. There's a policy for everything. Because if a young entrepreneur – they are their business. If something happens to them, if they're sick, they take a vacation, the business doesn't run without them. You need to structure it so that everyone knows what they're doing.

The way the franchises do it, it's fascinating. You understand why they're successful because they have that model. And you can take that model and you can put it in El Paso, Texas, you can put it in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and you can move it from any city and it runs exactly the same. There's a formula for making coffee. This is how much syrup goes in. This is how much sugar goes in. This is how much foam goes in. So having that formula and knowing and running the business that way I think is really, really important. I think taking that franchise class was very beneficial to me.

AP: And where did you take?

LH: At UTIP.

AP: At UTIP.

LH: UTIP offers it. I think it's a really good investment.

AP: You mentioned certification earlier. Are you –

LH: I'm working on my certification, and working on – because we've always sold to Ford Bliss, but now I want to get on the GSA, which is the General Services, so anything that Fort Bliss buys, you're on their vendor list and they can automatically come to you. But certification opens up a lot of doors. It's detailed and it's a lot of paperwork, but it's worth it. We're also working on a collegiate license so we can produce – with a collegiate license you can

produce for retail. So now I can produce for UTIP, which I do, but it can't be retail. It can only be for promotion, within department use.

AP: And the certification for Fort Bliss was that 8A or is it different?

LH: Well, there are so many different certifications, and that's another thing that start ups need to think about is finding out what certifications will work best for them. You know going down to the SBA, there's always classes that they offer on certification and on the different certifications. And also, just finding out about the different vendor lists that there are out there. The school districts have several. Region and teen has several. Whatever it is you're selling, office products, my type of services, and education materials, whatever it is you need to find out about all of those vendor applications or vendor lists that you can get on so that you're getting access to those bids. And that's also something that the SBA offers.

AP: So where do you see your business in ten years? Where do you see yourself going from here?

LH: In ten years, I'm hoping that one of the children will – I mean I don't ever see not being part of a business. I'd like to see one of the kids come in and run it. I think it has tremendous potential for growth, and you need that young mind to implement that social media and all of those ideas that they have and how they do business now because that's really different from how I do it. I'm trying to learn, but you need those young minds to come in and really boost it, take it in that new direction that it needs to go, and to grow, to continue.

AP: Well, is there anything else that you would like to add that I may not have asked you that you feel is pertinent to who Lisa Herrera is, or about your business or anything in general? Is there anything that you feel that I didn't ask you that I should have asked you?

LH: You know not necessarily because I think just knowing how someone comes up with an idea and how they take it to the next step and how they grow it is pretty much what we covered. I think maybe one of the main things is that just really having that business plan. Knowing how you're gonna grow and who you're gonna sell to, and what you're gonna sell your product for. I think if you really create a solid business plan, you have a sounding board; you have something to go off of, you know what you wanna

create. And there's so much help now, there's so much opportunity – I think of a million ways to make money all the time.

There's so many businesses that people can develop. There's so much need. If they see a need to hey, how can I fill that? What can I do to put myself in that market, and how am I gonna become competitive, and what's gonna set me apart. I think one thing I've learned, too, is that you can't sell everything to everybody. You've gotta really create your niche. You've gotta really go after that ideal client and focus there.

AP: Okay. Well, this concludes the interview with Lisa Herrera. Thank you so much.

LH: Thank you.

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Duration: 77 minutes

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