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Interview no. 1507

Fermin Dorado

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Fermin Dorado

Interviewer: Homero Galicia

Project: Hispanic Entrepreneurs Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, TX

Date of Interview: January 23, 2009

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Transcript No.: 1507

Transcriber / Summary: Patrick Driscoll

Fermin Dorado is the president of Dorado Engineering in El Paso, Texas, started in June 1996; before he was El Paso city engineer for 28 years; explains how he created a professional selection process that helped shift work from all anglo firms to more hispanic firms for the city of El Paso; Mr. Dorado recounts the pressure he experienced from Mayor Francis over his retirement and accusations of bribery; covers his role in getting El Paso districts restructured for more accurate community representation, his role in LULAC and legal battles with the city government. Mr. Dorado recalls growing up in Segundo Barrio and how it shaped his character; he was eighth of nine children; reasons he went to El Paso Tech High School for mechanics; discusses his siblings' professional lives and his parents influence. He then details his work in U.S. Steel in Chicago after graduating in 1960; mentions being drafted in the Army in 1965, how it gave him leadership confidence. He then goes over attending UTEP after the military; how he became a civil engineer; mentions his relationship with his wife; recalls his hiring as an employee for the City of El Paso, explains that all the engineers with degrees at the time were anglo and that he was the first Hispanic; explains the role of city engineers and his motivation to change the selection process to better represent the city population. Mr. Dorado discloses his motivation to start his business after retiring; mentions his children and their professions; his and his son's role in business; recalls the growth and challenges of his business; explains the civil engineer services they provide and his future plans to expand his business. He covers his business' relationship with the city; comparisons with other engineer firms; explains importance of public relations and other key factors in making engineering firms successful; reveals his opinions on younger engineers motivations. He describes his current role in LULAC, importance of the organization; recalls his grandfather being a mentor when raising him in Mexico, and later rejoining his parents in El Paso; describes his parents and living conditions growing up. Divulges his opinion on what Hispanics should do to succeed in business; his

concerns on running a business; discusses past issues with banks for investment; gives examples of poor business practices from other engineers. Mr. Dorado states that his biggest accomplishment is his family and where he learned his parenting skills; explains why he chose his business name, logo, and philosophy; describes some of his customers and his relationship with them; discusses past rewards and recognition he has received; reveals his role in helping the Border Farmworker Center get funds and their building through the city government; relationship to former El Paso County Judge Alicia Chacon. Reveals who his heroes were and why, such as former El Paso Mayor Jonathon Rogers.

Length of interview 96 minutes

Length of Transcript 64 pages

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This is January 23rd at 9:47 a.m., preparing for an interview with Fermin Dorado. Fermin Dorado is the president of Dorado Engineering at 2717 East Yandell.

HG: Let me ask you, Mr. Dorado, when did you start your engineering business?

FD: The business started in June of '96, when I retired from the City of El Paso.

HG: How many years were you with the city?

FD: I was with the city for 28 years.

HG: What did you do with the city?

FD: At the city – 13 years I was a city engineer for the City of El Paso. And perhaps that's where I feel that I made the most contribution to the city, especially the Hispanic community.

HG: And how is that?

FD: When I started with the city most of the work was being done by large firms or mainly Anglo firms. There were one or two Hispanic firms that actually got very little work from the city.

HG: What years was that?

FD: From '81, '82 when I started. And some of these firms weren't getting any work from the city. All the work from the city was going to these big

firms; mainly Anglo firms. And when I started, I started giving work to the Hispanic firms, and as a consequence of that, I think, that before I retired there were about 20 Hispanic firms doing work for the city.

HG: What kinds of firms?

FD: The architectural firms, doing the design work. We had the engineering firms doing the engineering and we had some construction companies, getting work from the city.

HG: What kinds of work?

FD: Before they weren't getting any work.

HG: What kinds of monies are we talking about?

FD: In the construction when I was there, we handled some like \$40, \$50 million a year. And in the design, I know we handled about \$10, \$20 million a year in design fees that started getting into the community.

HG: How were you able to give those contracts?

FD: Well, when I started the first thing I did, I established a criteria for selecting firms. Before I was there, there was no criteria for selecting firms. It was just I know you, you know me and I do the work. And I started a selection process for firms and I actually started a rating curve. Not really a curve but a rating system to rate them. I mainly did it to give these people a chance to participate.

HG: So without the rating process—

FD: Or the process for selecting firms, nobody knew what or how it was done.

HG: And how was it done?

FD: Mainly the friendship type of business type.

HG: Friendship with the engineers?

FD: With the engineers, with the companies.

HG: And historically Hispanic firms weren't —

FD: There weren't that many Hispanic firms. You look around now, and there's a lot of Hispanic firms, architectural and engineering everywhere. And as a matter of fact, you can probably go to all these firms and they'll tell you I was the one to give them their first job.

HG: So when you went to the city in '81?

FD: That's when I became the city engineer. I've been with the city since '69 and kind of raised through the ranks to become the city engineer.

HG: So there weren't very many Hispanic engineering firms?

FD: Nor architectural firms.

HG: In the 70's?

FD: 70's.

HG: When did they start?

FD: They started mainly in the 80's and what happened is that these people that were working for these other firms started making their own firms.

HG: Give me an example.

FD: Give you an example? Perspectiva, they used to work for other firms, national firms that were in El Paso. When they realized that they could get job themselves, they opened their own firm. Perspectiva has perhaps become one of the most successful architectural firms in architecture.

In the engineering, the Cardenas. I gave them both their first jobs when I was there. They used to work for another national firm that was in El Paso and they got out, they opened their own firms and I started giving them work from the city.

HG: So they were engineers that worked for other businesses?

FD: Yes.

HG: For national firms?

FD: National firms.

HG: And then they went out on their own?

FD: They went on their own, established a firm and came to the city and we gave them a job.

HG: Did they go out on their own because they knew they could get jobs now?

FD: Yes, that's why.

HG: Okay, because you were already the city engineer?

FD: I was the city engineer and they would come talk to me and give me their qualifications and talk to me about their possibilities of opening their own firm and getting work.

HG: Did that cause you problems?

FD: Yes. The big firms, of course, were very angry at me. They were going around saying that you had to be Hispanic to get work from the city, which was not true. Those firms were still getting work. They were just not getting it all. Those firms were still getting work because I needed a point that everybody would get work that was qualified. And of course, instead of getting 100 percent of the work, maybe they were only getting 20 percent. I understood that they were losing business and they weren't very happy and consequently they made it hard for me in that sense. .

And as a matter of fact, every mayor that went in, the first thing he would call me in their office and say, "I understand you're being very selective on your firms". I said, well, I don't know what you mean. I said, but if you're saying that we're selecting firms, yeah, we're selecting firms from across the board, from across a spectrum. Right now, the work is finally going to the community. I believe very strongly that firms that come to work for the city should be a cross-section of this community.

HG: But the city council would award —

FD: They were the ones that would actually award the contract because they were the only ones authorized to spend money but it was under my recommendation.

HG: And you had the criteria system?

FD: Yes, and the councilmen were part of the selection process. They sat on the selection committee.

HG: Did they get kickbacks from the larger Anglo firms?

FD: Not to my knowledge. Not to my knowledge at all.

HG: They would take your recommendation?

FD: They would take my recommendation.

HG: So how many years were you city engineer?

FD: Thirteen years.

HG: This is before you started your firm?

FD: Yes.

HG: So when you retired you wanted to start your own engineering firm?

FD: When I retired I actually didn't even want to start my own firm. I thought I was just gonna go fishing, but it got old. It got old in six months.

HG: Now, let me ask you before I leave that. When you left the city, you retired. Were you under any duress?

FD: I was under a lot of pressure by the mayor at that time, which was Francis. It was a lot of pressure. He used to put a lot of pressure on.

HG: What kind of pressure?

FD: About when I was gonna retire, and if I said blue, he'd say green. If I said red, he'd say yellow. No matter what I would do, we were always in disagreement and I know what he wanted. He wanted me out. As a matter of fact, he asked me, "when are you gonna retire?" And I said when I'm ready.

HG: Did you also get a lot of publicity for what you were doing?

FD: No, I didn't get a lot of publicity from it. As a matter of fact, at the end – I don't know if you're aware of it – they accused me of being on the take, of taking money.

HG: Who accused you?

FD: Francis. Francis because all his buddies who were all these Anglo firms were complaining to him that they weren't getting work; which I said that isn't true. They're getting work. They're not getting all of it. And they would accuse me of taking money from these other firms; that's why they were getting work.

HG: And did that cause any kind of investigation?

FD: It caused an FBI investigation that lasted for about two years and it finally came to and when they couldn't find anything because there was nothing to find.

HG: Now tell me about that investigation. Did it cause you any –?

FD: It caused our family a lot of stress, especially my wife. She really suffered through it and of course, you all have this stress. Although it makes you think, what the hell did I do? Maybe I did something wrong along the road. Why are these guys doing this to me? But it does make you doubt yourself.

Sometimes you think back, what the hell did I do? Did I do something wrong here? But no, and I was very fortunate that the legal community, especially the Hispanic lawyers, they all came to my assistance. As a matter of fact, I didn't spend one cent in legal fees. They all came forward and said we'll take care of it. And I'm very glad for that, yes.

HG: But you were also very involved in the community, no?

FD: I was very involved in the community through the LULAC organization but it was – the LULAC organization is a civil rights organization. I was very proud to be part of the group that established the single member district. I was one of the guys that sued the city, the schools and everybody else for a single member district.

HG: Yeah, what year?

FD: It was in 19 – I don't remember, '78 or '77.

HG: And why –?

FD: And everybody agreed to go single member district; mostly all except the Boston School District. That was the only one that had to go to court.

HG: Why did you leave – why did you [inaudible] single member districts?

FD: At the time, it was very difficult to elect Hispanic candidates or people into elected positions mainly because they had at large and they had all the people on the west side with a lot of money controlling the elections.

HG: They had at large districts?

FD: At large. They didn't have any districts. It was just at large. In other words, at that time, I think there were five aldermen at the city and they were most of them from the west side; kind of buddy type. I'm gonna run for mayor and I want my buddies to run for – and they raised all the money and they get elected; although the community was already at that time more than 60 percent, 65 percent Hispanic. It was very difficult.

HG: And what did this single member district allow? What did it do?

FD: This allowed for each district of a city to have a representative. Now you see a lot of Hispanics being elected and elected by their peers in the district that they live. Before, it was just people living in the west side and being elected at large.

HG: And how would you characterize the west side?

FD: The west side, of course, has probably been the most – as far as money is concerned, has probably been the most influential side of town. That's where most of the businessmen live; that's where most of the big corporations go. So that's why they were very well established.

HG: And that suit came through LULAC?

FD: It came through LULAC and **MALDEV**. MALDEV came in through it. It came through LULAC and MALDEV.

HG: Were you an officer of MALDEV?

FD: I was the president of the local council, yes.

HG: Okay and what years was that?

FD: '77, '78, somewhere in there when it happened.

HG: So when you started with the city you were already –

FD: I was already – as a matter of fact, I remember this incident when I was not the city engineer at the time. The city attorney called me in his office when we filed suit against the city for single member districts. And he says do you know you could get fired for suing the city? And I said, no, I didn't know you could get fired for doing what's right. And he said, well, you could get fired. I said, okay. So I went and talked to our lawyer and I said, look, I talked to the city attorney. He called me in this office and this is what he said.

And he said, okay, go back to the city attorney and tell them that that's fine but we want it in writing. So I went back to him and said, hey, remember the conversation we had last week about being fired? He said yeah. Can you please put it in writing because my attorney would like to see it in writing? He doesn't believe me you would say things like that. He never put it in writing.

HG: Was that a form of intimidation?

FD: Yeah, I think it was a form of intimidation. And of course, the city attorney was an Anglo but I knew none of that. I said I didn't know I could get fired.

HG: Why didn't you get intimidated?

FD: I don't know. I always felt that I started at zero. I could always go back to zero; and it wasn't bad. See, when I was living in the Segundo barrio we had very little for us and it wasn't that bad.

HG: So you grew up in the Segundo barrio?

FD: I grew up in the Segundo barrio.

HG: And how would you characterize the Segundo barrio when you were growing up?

FD: The Segundo barrio was a very cohesive barrio. It was a very bully barrio mainly that was our way of trying to keep whatever we had. And you grew up very individualistic in a way.

HG: What high school did you go to?

FD: I went to Tech, El Paso Technical High School and I used to live three blocks from Bowie High School.

HG: Why did you go to El Paso Tech?

FD: I went to El Paso Technical High School because when I was in the eighth grade or ninth grade, I was given an aptitude test, I think, and they told my parents that I had the aptitude to be a mechanic and they let you go to El

Paso Tech and get it free. And my dad, you should go talk to him – and I actually didn't want to go.

I was going to Bowie High School and all my friends were going to Bowie High School and my dad, being a janitor, he said I think it's good that you go get trade. He said, so why don't you to Tech? He said why don't you go for one year? If you don't like it, come back to Bowie. I never went back to Bowie.

HG: Did you like Tech?

FD: I liked Tech.

HG: How did you get there? You lived –

FD: I walked.

HG: How many –?

FD: We used to walk from Bowie High School all the way to Technical High School. I don't know, about two or three miles in the morning, at night, in the afternoon. But I was not the only guy. There were a whole bunch of us that would walk together. But that was part of life.

HG: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

FD: I come from nine. I'm the second to the last and in a way my brothers and my sisters, since I was one of the babies, I grew up spoiled. I remember I was telling them that I never had any new clothes for the longest time because I always got passed down clothes and shoes. I said hey, I've never had new clothes. It was all passed down.

HG: And what do your brothers and sisters do?

FD: They're all very good. They're all professionals. My sisters, they married well, most of them are retired. I'm one of the youngest ones.

HG: And why did that have – did they go to college after high school?

FD: No, they were always – we just came from a very strong mother because my mom used to be ruler of the house.

HG: What would she say? What kind of messages you get from your mom?

FD: My mom says always do the right thing, be smart and whatever you do, be the best. She said – I remember I was working in a grocery store –

HG: Which one?

FD: [Inaudible], it's outside El Paso. And she said, mijo, if you want to work in that [inaudible] that's fine, but be the best grocery stacker there is. She said, whatever you do, be the best.

HG: Were you in high school at the time?

FD: I was in high school, working part-time. And she would tell us, whatever you want to do, just be the best, whatever.

HG: So you worked weekends and nights.

FD: Weekends and after school, yeah.

HG: What kinds of grades did you get at El Paso Tech?

FD: I was an average student, B's, C's.

HG: And what trade did you learn?

FD: Auto mechanics. I came out of Tech as a Certified Auto Mechanic.

HG: Okay and what year did you graduate?

FD: I graduated from Tech in 1960.

HG: And then what did you do?

FD: I was still around here. I never liked mechanics as a way to make a living. I enjoyed doing mechanics as a hobby, for myself. I still do but not as earning my living. I hung around El Paso for a couple of years and my sister married an engineer from Chicago in Fort Bliss. He was a soldier and married my sister, my sister right next to me and when he got out of the service they went to Chicago and he asked me to go. Do you want to come to Chicago? He was working US Steel and I went to Chicago and I was working with US Steel. I became a certified pipe fitter working for US Steel.

HG: How old were you?

FD: I went through their apprenticeship program for about a year and a half and I became a pipe fitter. I was around 21, 22. I stayed there for about two, three years working at US Steel. Then I got drafted in the service.

HG: You did?

FD: I got drafted.

HG: You were living in Chicago?

FD: Yes. I got drafted here because I never changed my board. They sent a letter here to my mom's house.

HG: So your address was still here in El Paso?

FD: Yeah. We still had all our family.

HG: So you went in with the Army?

FD: I went into the Army in 1965.

HG: And how long were you in the Army?

FD: Two years.

HG: And what did you do in the Army?

FD: I was a mechanic.

HG: Because of your trade.

FD: I was an **[inaudible]** and mechanic.

HG: Where did you serve?

FD: I served in Korea most of my time.

HG: Oh, you were in the Korean War?

FD: Yeah, no, it was over. The Korean War was over. It was right after that. So I stayed there for Korea and I got out of the service. I didn't want to go back to Chicago any more. But the service was good to me in the sense that it gave me a lot of confidence. It gave me confidence in myself. It gave me the confidence that I could do it because here was a guy from the Segundo barrio being a sergeant in the Army, leading people and telling people what to do and mostly Anglos.

HG: In two years, you got to be sergeant?

FD: Yeah.

HG: How did that happen?

FD: I just went through the ranks. Yeah and gave the [inaudible], what they call the buck sergeant, the first sergeant. They have about six, seven sergeants. I was the lowest sergeant but I was given the opportunity and I did well. And when I got out, I knew I was gonna go to college.

HG: What did you need the confidence?

FD: Huh?

HG: Why did you need that confidence?

FD: I never had the chance to really lead people and in a way, Anglos always kind of intimidated me. I always thought that they were a lot smarter than I was and they were better trained than I was. And when I worked in

Chicago as a pipe fitter all my bosses were Anglos. I was one of the very few Chicanos and we were always – and I saw a lot of Chicanos in the labor section but very few on the freights.

So that kind of intimidates you when you are 21, 22 years old. But when I was in the service I think, I could do this. And then I met some guys who were college graduates and I didn't think they were that smart. Hey, if this guy could do it, I could do it. So that's why I decided when I went back off the service, to go enroll at **U Tech**. And I didn't even know what I wanted to study. I only knew that I wanted to go to college. What I wanted to study I didn't even know.

But then when I registered, since I was already a veteran and I was entitled to some GI payments, you had to go through some line for veterans and I met Colonel Evans, I still remember it. He used to be in charge of the veterans at U Tech. We got talking and he says you got a job, son? Do you need a job, son? I go yeah, I need a job. I need a part-time job. He said okay, go over there to the engineering department, talk to this friend of mine. He gave me his name. He's hiring students, he has part-time work.

HG: Colonel Evans?

FD: Colonel Evans.

HG: He used to run the –?

FD: He used to be in charge of the veterans office here at U Tech.

HG: Did he also run the career center?

FD: I don't know, maybe he did. Not when I was there. I'm talking '67, '68. I'm talking forty years ago.

HG: How many Hispanic students were there at the time?

FD: We were a lot of students, Hispanics. I think we were already the majority. As a matter of fact, when I was there they elected the first Chicano SA president. Uribe, I still remember the guy.

HG: Student activities?

FD: Yes, the first Mexicano elected. But at that time, there were a lot of veterans like myself that were coming back and very aggressive. We weren't taking shit. We weren't taken prisoners anymore and we weren't being intimidated anymore. So a lot of veterans were very outspoken, very aggressive. Especially coming from Vietnam, a lot of people were really aggressive. So we got together and we elected the first Chicano.

HG: So you got a job in the engineering department?

FD: I went over there and talked to the Dean. I remember his name, Dr. Woods and he was also a veteran and he had served in Korea and we talked. And so you want a part-time job here? And I go, yes. Well, I can hire you. No problem, but there's only one thing. What's that? You gotta enroll in the engineering school.

I said no problem. How do I enroll in the engineering school? He said, well here, I'll fix the paper. Take it back. That's how I enrolled in engineering. I was thinking if I don't like it, I'd go do something else. But I liked it and I did well. So I became an engineering [inaudible].

HG: How long did it take you to finish college?

FD: Two and a half years.

HG: Did you already have some college?

FD: No.

HG: You finished college in two and a half years? How did you do that?

FD: I went summers. I was carrying 20, 21 hours per semester. And at the time, they had two summer sessions, and I could carry nine hours per session with the permission of the Dean. So in the summer alone I'd pick up 18 hours. Well, I was in a hurry. I wanted out. I was married at the time already.

HG: What year did you get married?

FD: '66.

HG: Before you went into the service?

FD: Just before I went to the service. I was newlywed.

HG: A girl from El Paso or from Chicago?

FD: No, from here, my high school girlfriend. She's still my wife.

HG: And she went to Chicago with you?

FD: No, that's after I came back from Chicago.

HG: Okay and what was your degree in, in engineering?

FD: Civil engineering.

HG: Civil engineering, okay. And so you graduated in –?

FD: In '70.

HG: In '70.

FD: Summer. I started in January of '68 and I graduated in the summer of 1970.

HG: And so what was your first job out of college?

FD: The city and I'm still with the city.

HG: In the engineering department?

FD: In the engineering department. I went and applied and I used to tell people that when I started working for the city I was earning less money than I was earning when I was a pipe fitter in Chicago about six years before that, or four. I was earning less money as an engineer for the city than what I was earning being a pipe fitter in US Steel.

HG: You were earning less money as an engineer than as a pipe fitter?

FD: Than what I was earning as a pipe fitter in Chicago.

HG: Years before.

FD: Years before.

HG: And how did that make you feel?

FD: I was okay with it. And you know at first – I remember because I tell this. I spent the first four years working for the city looking for another job. I always said, the city is just gonna be a place to get a job and then look around and I would send a lot of resumes and I'm gonna wait for the right job to come. And at about the fifth year, the guys from Fort Worth, they City of Fort Worth had just some bond issue and they needed engineers. And they needed an engineer to take over some of the department and I interviewed and I was offered the job.

And it was almost gonna double my salary from El Paso. As a matter of fact, they flew me and my wife, and we went and we talked, and they showed us, and on the way back, my wife wasn't very happy. I said, what's the problem? She said I know you wanted the job. We'll go. Personally, I don't want to go. You don't want to go to Fort Worth? She said no. It's okay, we won't go.

I got out of the plane, picked up the phone, called the guys and said thank you but not accepting the job. I thank you very much. The guy says, it was your wife, huh? I go yeah, it was my wife. The guy noticed that she wasn't very happy. And then after that, I never looked for a job anymore.

HG: You're still with the city, so –

FD: I'm still here.

HG: Were there many Hispanics working for the city at the time?

FD: Most of the people in each – I would say most – all of the people were Hispanic, except for the city engineer. The city engineer was an Anglo. But most of us were Hispanic.

HG: And degreed engineers?

FD: Degreed. I was one of the first people that they hired when they started hiring degreed engineers. Because I know when we started, we hired about four people at the same time. This Anglo guy realized that he didn't have too many engineers so he hired four of them right away to have some of the sections he had.

HG: So you got to learn who the engineering firms were in El Paso at the time.

FD: Oh yeah. I meet with them all the time. I belong to the association and we would meet in the meeting so surely I know them. And I noticed that most of us were workers, not owners.

HG: What association?

FD: The Engineer Association.

HG: And most were workers not owners?

FD: Most of the Hispanics were workers, not owners. Most of us were workers not owners of companies. Now you go to those meetings and most of them are owners of the company.

HG: So you saw that change. Can you describe that change, how that happened?

FD: Well, the change was – it was not even planned. It was not to say we had a schedule or a plan. I just felt that Hispanic firms needed to be given the opportunity to compete. And it just happened and then when people realized that they could get their own firm and get work they started doing that. I didn't have a goal. I didn't say I'm gonna do this or not. I just said we need to – our work needs to reflect the city, the people that pay the taxes. And that was goal and that was my saying all the time. I'm just trying to make the city be a reflection of the population.

HG: What was the work for the city engineering department? The work, what did –?

FD: Oh, we did all the engineering for the city; buildings, streets, airport, [inaudible]. Everything is done in the engineering department.

HG: And what would you hire these firms to do?

FD: Design, the dams, the airport, the buildings, the streets, the [inaudible]. All these things because you see, we didn't have enough staff to do that.

HG: Okay and so when you left the city and you retired what ideas did you have of – you didn't think of forming your own business at the time?

FD: At first, not because when I was in the city and being young, I spent a lot of time out of the house. And one of the things that my wife would ask me, she said, well, now that you're retired I hope you spend more time with us at the house. And I said yes, I will. I'll spend it with you and this is what started it. I didn't have any plans of starting a new business or anything. I think I stayed about six, seven months at the house and then I knew that I just – I was driving my wife crazy anyway.

HG: How many children do you have?

FD: Four.

HG: How many boys and girls?

FD: I have one boy and three girls.

HG: Okay. Did they pursue professional careers?

FD: Yes. They're all professionals.

HG: In what fields?

FD: In accounting, two in accounting; one in administration and my son in engineering.

HG: Your son works with you in engineering?

FD: My son and my daughter.

HG: Okay and your son went to?

FD: U Tech.

HG: U Tech and got an engineering degree also?

FD: He's gonna get it now in May. He didn't ever want to go to school, he always was dad, you know. As a matter of fact, he used to tell me no, I'm not like you dad. I understand that, I'm not like you. It's okay. Okay. So

he stayed out of school for many times. After a couple of years he says, dad, I think I gotta go back to school. I said, yeah, whatever. I left him alone. He stayed out of school for a long time, ten years or so or more.

HG: Working?

FD: Working with me, a technician here and learning.

HG: When you started your business?

FD: Yeah, he came over.

HG: And what did you start your business doing?

FD: We started doing a little work. A little work here, a little work there, just mainly to stay open, pay the rent.

HG: How many engineers, just you?

FD: We have two engineers.

HG: When you began?

FD: Yeah and then the thing about it is most of – all of my workers, most of them are retired from the city. Most of the people who are retired want to work for me.

HG: Okay and so you knew you could get work?

FD: I knew I could get work, yes.

HG: Where did you get work?

FD: I started calling some of the people that I knew and I started getting a little. And I was not pursuing a lot of work or big work. People started giving me little work; fine, no problem. And I guess just most of my work is just gonna warm up. People come over, somebody recommended them.

HG: Were there any business issues that you had to deal with that were different than working at the city?

FD: I guess the biggest check was the payroll. All of a sudden, I had to worry about having a payroll. I never worried about it. All of a sudden, I have to worry about paying the bills, which I didn't worry about it. So all of a sudden, it became a financial matter. Okay, do I want to stay or do I want to close? What am I gonna do? And I talked to my son and he – thank God, he takes most of it. So I said, what do you want to do? It's up to you. I can go fishing tomorrow.

So, that's good. So we've done it and lately we have been pursuing it a little bit harder. I think right now we're in the process of going – qualifying for a [inaudible] per room and all that. We've never done it before and we're in the process of expanding the business and then this happened. The economy happened so the only thing we're kind of glad that we haven't laid off anybody yet. The work is slow right now but we're kind of happy that we're surviving it.

HG: What kind of engineering do you do?

FD: Civil, mainly civil. Roads, bridges, development, shopping centers, all this stuff. So flat control, I do a lot of flat control for the city and the county.

HG: So how much of the engineering work do you do for your business?

FD: Myself? I'm the quality control guy. I review most of the work. I sit down, have a cup of coffee, go over the plans, make sure they're okay. So my kid does most of it. He asks me, we're doing this, what do you think? We'll do it this way, do it this way.

HG: And who does the business management?

FD: Me, which is very little because we are not a very big company.

HG: How many employees do you have?

FD: We have one permanent – we have about five permanent and then I have about 10 that are on call. They're retired and they're fine with it. They say, we're retired; you need us, you call us. And I do that, and I call them a lot. Sometimes they say don't call me for a couple of months, okay? All right; so it's good for – that's where my son has learned a lot from these people that have a lot of experience and they work with him. He has learned a lot from these people. They used to work with me and he has surrounded himself with a lot of experience.

HG: So in running an engineering firm, what percentage of running an engineering firm is business and what percent is engineering?

FD: I would say about 20 percent – no, about 30 percent is business and about 70 percent is engineering.

HG: What challenges have you faced growing your business?

FD: The challenge that we have is staying open. How can we stay open and then the challenge is do we want to stay a small company? Do we want to go medium sized; do we want to grow? Personally, I didn't want to grow but then, I'm on my way down as far as my engineering profession. But my son says, no, we need to expand. It's okay; so you take over and you can expand.

So right now, we were in the process of expanding the business, hiring more people but then this happens. No [inaudible]. It kind of slowed down so we kind of put it on hold but we're in the process of going through – the community college is helping putting our editing program together and helping us going to Fort Bliss and all this to get more work.

HG: You're using the small business development center?

FD: Yes, we're using the small business –

HG: To help you put together your avocation?

FD: Yes and then Hector is working with us now, Hector Villa. And he is helping us a lot with the business side. He said, look, do this. You have a lot of time right now because we don't have a lot of environmental work so – he's actually the guy that put it together. So he is doing that.

HG: He is also an engineer?

FD: Yes.

HG: But he had his own business?

FD: He has his own business, environmental. And we started to do environmental now that he's here so we want to push that too, the environmental side under my supervision. So it was probably from about a year ago that we decided we wanted to experiment with business.

HG: How does El Paso accept your business as a Hispanic business?

FD: It's well accepted. It's still well accepted. It's getting very competitive because there is a lot of us now, especially the Hispanics. Now the minority now is the Anglo business; in the engineering profession anyway. I don't think there's too many Anglo firms right now.

HG: In engineering?

FD: Yeah, in the engineering fields. Most of us are – most of the big companies have pulled out because they're competing and they don't want to compete anymore.

HG: Do you find in Hispanic businesses or in engineering firms, do you find some are better than others?

FD: Of course.

HG: How do you rate that?

FD: Some have just very good engineers and some of them have very – the engineering firms that are really, really successful are the companies that have a good PR. I notice that.

HG: Does that have to do with their competence as engineers?

FD: No, it's just PR.

HG: How would you describe PR?

FD: PR is people that put up proposals and they have beautiful proposals. I mean, maybe the contents are not that good, but the presentation is beautiful. And a lot of people that's what they want.

HG: But, I mean, if you're making an engineering presentation, aren't engineers looking at the presentation?

FD: Well, sometimes they have to sell it to non-engineers. Like right now in the city you sell it to non-engineers.

HG: To the committees?

FD: To the committees of non-engineers and they like pony and dog shows and they don't have too much concern with the technical field.

HG: Are you good at that?

FD: I'm learning. I'm not good but hopefully I will. And then Joe Lopez is, of course, helping a lot putting together to make it pretty.

HG: And what is Joe Lopez' background?

FD: Advertising, Lopez Advertising. You don't know Joe Lopez?

HG: Yes, yes, yes, yes. But I mean, he's helping you –?

FD: Make – he says, mira, this is the way you put it together and make this. Put **flowerscape** [inaudible].

HG: So he's helping you improve your –?

FD: Presentation.

HG: Okay, our PR.

FD: My PR yes. And we need to and my son is coming around to the computer. He's developing new things too with the technical stuff, with a lot of flowers or all that stuff too. I noticed that people that were doing that were being very successful and I said, shit, we need to do that too. I was just doing technical, technical.

HG: So tell me about keys to success. What would you identify as your keys to success?

FD: I guess you have to first identify success. What is success to you or to me?

HG: How do you define success?

FD: Success to me is to be happy with myself; and I feel that if I'm happy with myself, I make people around me happy. And that has been maybe my thing with my family. If I'm happy, I know that my family's gonna be happy because I'm gonna make them happy.

So that's what I'm saying, maybe as far as the business being successful, I want to make sure that whatever I do I feel happy about it. That I want to do it, that it's gonna give me some type of satisfaction doing it.

HG: So where is your passion?

FD: For my work? Well, I like doing engineering. I do like sitting down and working the numbers and my wife says that numbers drive me crazy because I can crunch them pretty good. And in engineering most of the design is numbering, making a lot of calculations.

So I guess it's – my son says the same thing, that once I sit down to design I get very involved with it. So that's what I like to do, sit down and design something where there's a street, it's a dam, it's a wrap around way, whatever. Do the crunching, do the nuts and bolts.

HG: Do you see other engineers not good at that?

FD: I think some of the young engineers are more – they're measuring success monetarily more than engineering. And that's just my observation that I see with these people, especially the young ones. Maybe when they get old, they get passionate; maybe later on. And most of the engineering firms in El Paso are young firms.

They're not old firms. I consider myself probably one of the older engineers. Most of the firms that have come up in the last 15, 20 years are young engineers. Very aggressive, but I think they're measuring their success financially. And that's good if that's how they feel. Because I see some of the work and I don't want to criticize them but I could have done it better.

HG: And what – you're still involved in the community?

FD: Oh yeah.

HG: You're still involved with LULAC?

FD: I'm still involved with LULAC although I'm more or less in the backside. It says to me that I don't see too many young people joining LULAC. Maybe some of us are getting old. We still have some young people but not as much as I'd like to see. It's just the older people that are still – my son is one of them. He doesn't feel that there's any prejudice or there isn't a need for LULAC.

HG: Is there any –?

FD: Need for LULAC.

HG: Anymore?

FD: Yeah, but they're still young. Maybe because they never experienced it or if they have maybe they didn't understand it.

HG: And you experienced it?

FD: Of course. We all did. I'm pretty sure you did. We all did growing up, going to school. We went to school and we didn't have air conditioners. If you went to other schools, they had air conditioners. You went to schools where the books were very old. You went to other schools and they had brand new books.

HG: Are you talking about El Paso County –?

FD: Public schools, yeah, different parts of town. In Bowie High School all the books we had were old, they were pass overs.

HG: Bowie was down in – the Hispanic high school?

FD: Oh yeah.

HG: And the other schools had –?

FD: El Paso Tech was the same thing. I only went to those two high schools and El Paso Tech was the same. Initially it was about 99 percent Hispanic. It was a trade school. We were all learning trades.

HG: And the other schools that had the new books and all, they were –?

FD: They were El Paso High, Austin High School. They had beautiful stadiums, they had beautiful gyms. So you could tell right away. And they wore better clothes than we did. But that was their [inaudible].

HG: Who were your mentors?

FD: I consider my mentors probably – I grew up very close to my grandfather.

HG: Tell me about your grandfather.

FD: My grandfather, as a matter of fact, for the longest time I thought he was my father.

HG: Really?

FD: Yes.

HG: Why is that?

FD: Because I grew up with him.

HG: Lived with him?

FD: Lived with him.

HG: He lived in your house?

FD: Yeah, no, no, I lived with him in Jimenez [inaudible], in Mexico, [Jimex](#).
I lived with him until I was about 11 or 12 years old.

HG: In Jimenez?

FD: Yeah.

HG: In Jimenez.

FD: He used to come in the summer over here.

HG: So you went to elementary school in –?

FD: Fui hasta el seis. I went to sixth grade in Mexico.

HG: With your grandfather and grandmother or just grandfather?

FD: My grandfather, just my grandfather. My grandmother died and he used to live with my aunt, him and my aunt. I thought my aunt was my mom and my grandfather was my dad.

HG: What messages did you get from that?

FD: My grandfather had a very – he was a farmer, and he was a farmer with very primitive tools. He used to use the arado in tilling, he never had any mechanical stuff but he was a very hard working guy. He had to get up at 6:00 a.m. work until about 7:00 p.m. or 8:00 p.m. every day. And his thing was he wasn't gonna work for nobody, that he was gonna be self-sufficient and he did in his own way. But he was a very, very dedicated person.

And I still remember one of my cousins told me that my grandfather was not my father, that he was my abuelo. No es tu papa, es tu abuelo y luego salgo corriendo con el y luego le digo – le decía yo Papá Luz, mi Papá Luz. ¿Papá Luz, es cierto que no es mi papá, que eres mi abuelo? Y luego se me queda viendo y me dice, ¿que quieres que sea, tu papá o tu abuelo? Mi papá. Bueno, pues entonces soy tu papá. **[Spanish]**

So I grew with him. Me trató muy bien. He gave me a lot of advice and he's the guy – I didn't want to come home here. He was saying, you gotta go.

HG: Why did you have to come over here?

FD: Pues acá estaba mi familia, mi mamá y mis hermanos.

HG: But you knew your dad?

FD: Yeah. Me dijo, tienes que irte para allá mijo. Tienes que ir a la escuela, tienes que aprender. So I came and he was very proud of me. He got to see me graduate from civil engineering.

HG: Really? Your grandfather saw you graduate from –?

FD: I brought him and I told him, this is for you. So he was very, very proud. As a matter of fact, he had 15 kids. My grandfather, it's on my mom's side. Y cuando se iba a morir me habló mi tía y me dice, tu abuelo está muy malo. So I went. I spent a couple of days with him. Y me dice mi tía, he didn't ask for anybody other than you. He wanted to see you. Me pongo muy emocional porque me acuerdo.

HG: So what did he teach you?

FD: He teach me the work ethics, be honest, be proud of who you are. Be proud of who you are, never look down on a person and never look up to a person. Always look at everybody. [Inaudible].

HG: What kind of farming did he do?

FD: Me acuerdo que me decía, never be afraid to be wrong.

HG: Really? He would say that?

FD: No tengas miedo, si estas mal, corrígelo. No tengas miedo. Me decía, no tengas miedo. So I was never afraid to get fired.

HG: Really?

FD: Yeah, that's what helped me. I was never and you know what? They never threatened me to fire me other than the lawyer. Even when I had my political differences with the mayors, not one of them ever said, I'm gonna fire you; never.

HG: Do you say you have a lot of backbone?

FD: It depends what you – I have a lot of faith in myself. You expect more and expect more.

HG: And where did that come from?

FD: My grandfather, my parents, my mom.

HG: Tell me about your dad.

FD: My dad, pobrecito, he was always – todavía vive. He's 90. I was talking to him yesterday. ¿Cuántos años va a cumplir, jefe? 90. Mi jefa todavía vive. She's 93. Mi jefe, pobrecito, he always passes it to my mom. I would go to him, hey; habla con tu mamá. Habla con tu mamá. So we always talk to my mom. Pero he was a very good provider. He was a very gentle man, todavía es. He was a very gentle man. Ahorita no está tomando.

HG: Where did he work?

FD: He worked at Fort Bliss. He was a – me decía que no era janitor, que era custodian. And he retired when he was 70 and they were putting pressure on him to retire. The last 15 years que trabajó en Fort Bliss, he was in charge of the general's house. El que se encargaba de – me decía, I finally have a good job and these guys want me to retire. Hell, no, I'm not gonna retire.

Me decía, I finally have a good job, que me paga un poquito mejor y me la paso suave y quieren que me salga. No, [inaudible] I'm not gonna get up. So finally, at 70, it was mandatory that he retire. So he retired. Pero he was always a very good provider, a very gentle man, very well read. That was his spirit.

Aunque a veces leía historias del – you know, those prostitution y todo lo de el queda esos libros. Pero he always had a book.

HG: English or Spanish?

FD: English.

HG: Really?

FD: Yeah.

HG: Was he educated here?

FD: He was educated here. He dropped out of Bowie High School when he was in the seventh grade. Pero he always liked to read. Todo el tiempo le gustaba leer.

HG: Novels, anything?

FD: Novels, si, whatever. He always had a book. So sabía much as far as a book is concerned. He's very smart.

HG: Did you grow up with the desire to read like that?

FD: I developed my reading skills in the Army. That's when I appreciated to read. And the Army had a lot of idle time, especially if you didn't have any money. So we spent a lot of time in the barracks so we used to go to the library and check out books. And I developed a really good taste for plays. But I would like to read them more than to go see them; you know how the put the best 10 plays of the 40's and all that. I developed a taste for reading those plays. I read almost all of those plays and I enjoyed it.

HG: Like *Death of a Salesman*?

FD: *Death of a Salesman, Come Back Little Sheba, A Streetcar Named Desire*, all those. I read them in the army and I developed kind of a taste for that. So and I don't read as much as I used to. No porque ahora ya me quedo dormido. Ahora un libro estoy leyendo y –

HG: Tell me about your mother.

FD: My mother worked all her life. She worked in the – cociendo. She worked all her life for Billy the Kid.

HG: Billy the Kid was a manufacturer?

FD: A manufacturer.

HG: Clothing manufacturer?

FD: A clothing manufacturer. She used to be – cocía.

HG: Sewing.

FD: Sewing, sewing machine. She worked 30 years there.

HG: How many, 30 years?

FD: 30 and she retired. A very strong lady, very decisive. She said, vamos a hacer esto; vámonos. **[Inaudible]**.

HG: She ran the house?

FD: She ran the house. I remember – cuando estaba chavalo yo. We used to live in a presidio, the tenements. We had four rooms and then, I don't know if you're familiar with the tenements. The restrooms, they have common restrooms because I remember my sisters, every time they had to go to the bathroom I had to go with them, kind of pull guard outside for my sisters. And I remember one time there was a house right next to a presidio that was for sale that eventually became our house. **[Inaudible]** we're talking about that they needed to buy a house because the girls – ya estaban señoritas and they needed more privacy.

HG: Your mother?

FD: My mother; and mom said wow, es mucho dinero. No sé si lo podemos pagar. And I didn't think we were going to get it pero nevertheless, next week we were moving in. My mom went and got all the paperwork to own it. My mom said, si no lo podemos pagar nos regresamos. **[Spanish]**

HG: Which tenement did you grow up in?

FD: Está hasta allí. Hay una Flores El Paisano. Flores El Paisano.

HG: Second floor, first floor?

FD: We used to live in the second floor.

HG: First floor?

FD: Second floor.

HG: And four rooms?

FD: Four rooms.

HG: And how many –?

FD: It was ten of us.

HG: And the kitchen and two bedrooms or –?

FD: Kitchen and two bedrooms. One era para – teníamos un cuarto de mi jefa, la cocina, un cuarto de los vatos y un cuarto para mis carnales.

HG: And why would you have to guard your sisters when they went to the bathroom?

FD: In the night – pues tenían miedo de ir solas y todo eso, que no fuera a pasarles algo. So I used to walk out with them or my brother or my other brother. They never went to – in the daytime, they did, but in the night, they never went by themselves.

HG: Were they very religious?

FD: My mom, no not very religious. I think I'm more religious than they are and I'm not very religious. I go to church regularly, every Sunday, festive days, días festivos, I go to church.

HG: So where do you get your values from?

FD: I believe I get them from my grandfather. My grandfather was very religious. Y todo el tiempo me llevaba a misa, que me iba a hacer la primera comunión. Siempre me llevó.

HG: What kind of farm did he have?

FD: He used to grow, alfalfa, corn. Wheat, corn, todo eso.

HG: Was he a rich man?

FD: No, no, he was a very humble man and none of his sons wanted to be a – were not farmers. None of his sons were. It was very disappointing to him that none of his sons wanted to take over the farm. It was a lot of work, though, living in a farm; especially if you don't have money.

HG: And you worked there?

FD: I worked it. Yeah, I worked all the time. You get up in the morning and I would see my grandfather get up, go milk the cows, feed the cows, all that.

HG: He lived until what age?

FD: About 11, 11.

HG: No, I mean what age did he live to?

FD: Ninety-six.

HG: He was 96, wow. What advice would you give Hispanic business owners today?

FD: In the engineering field – it's hard to give advice because I have not been a very good businessman.

HG: Why do you say that?

FD: Because I don't – as far as the business is concerned, we're pushing it because my son wants to push it not because I want to push it. I would say if you really want to have a business then make up your mind that you're gonna do it. And I'm gonna say don't be afraid to be wrong. Don't be afraid to trip. If you fall down, get up and keep going.

HG: Have you had trips with your business where you fell down?

FD: Oh yeah. Sometimes things don't go right.

HG: Like what kinds of things?

FD: Sometimes people don't pay us. It happens. Sometimes a design doesn't come out the way we want it and we need to change it. But that's mainly – what worries me more about my business is paying my employees. That's probably my No. 1 concern. I worry how am I gonna pay my employees?

HG: Have you had times when you couldn't?

FD: Well, I have been very fortunate that yes and not have to reach into my own personal pocket. Okay, I have to, and I've been very fortunate or else I would do it. So sometimes well, because I have to carry it but –

HG: Have you had to go to banks?

FD: No, I hardly ever go to the banks.

HG: Why?

FD: I went once. I got in trouble with the IRS sometime back –

HG: With your business or –a?

FD: My business, and it was through my fault, but actually, it was through somebody else that didn't do the right thing. So anyway, the IRS dijo que le debía como \$30,000.00. And I didn't have \$30,000.00 in the business and I went to the bank – went to three or four banks and they all said no, especially the IRS. And as a matter of fact, instead of helping me, they scared the hell out of me more. No, the IRS, chapter 9 – so I went and borrowed against my own.

HG: You went to the bank?

FD: I went to my savings and I said hey, I'm gonna borrow money on my [inaudible]. But they wouldn't give me a loan. So I said, screw you guys. **[Spanish]** El que se porta más bien es Fermín. That guy helps me when I need, if I need help. Luckily, I have not had the necessity but I know que si lo necesito, he would help me.

HG: You're talking about Fermin –?

FD: Acosta.

HG: At AGCE.

FD: Yes. Since they opened about five years ago, they started their small business section; before they didn't have it.

HG: Do you go to Fermin or do you go to Arturo?

FD: Now I go to Moreno, through Moreno. But before I used to go – because if I go to Fermin he sends me to him. But I have not [inaudible] –

HG: Yeah, because Fermin is vice president –

FD: Yes.

HG: And Arturo runs the commercial lending –

FD: The small business. Y se porta bien y me dice, cuando necesites, ven. So I've been fortunate not to and I think this is one of the things that probably keeps us open at this hard time, that we don't owe. No debemos dinero. And if you can run a business and don't owe money, I think that's probably one of the – borrowing money is easy. I think paying it is hard. And I tell my son in the business, look son, making money is not very hard but keeping it is.

HG: I'm gonna ask you a different kind of question. I have seen and well, I need to confirm with you. Have you seen engineering firms do things that are not appropriate in terms of getting contracts, in terms of – I guess primarily getting contracts?

FD: I have not. I have seen sour grapes.

HG: For not getting contracts?

FD: For not getting contracts; and I think that's not good. Like some people, usually when there's a big job, you usually have to compete and they usually interview three or four. But only one is going to get it. And

usually the people that don't get it, they start badmouthing the company that gets it. And I think – that's what I think.

And I know they used to call me when I was there and hey, esa compañía. Si, you got a problem with their professionalism, call the board. Okay, because he has a license just like you do; and as far as I'm concerned, he can do the work. If you have a problem with their professionalism, call the board.

HG: Has the board come against any engineers?

FD: No, it's puro sour grapes. And there's a couple of companies in town that think that they deserve all the work, that they're the only good engineers in town. Not that I seen them go and do something wrong, pero they always think that they're the best engineering firms and they deserve all the work.

HG: And what do you say to that?

FD: I said bullshit. I said hey, there's good engineers everywhere.

HG: Are they Anglo firms or Hispanic?

FD: No, they're Hispanic. Some of the Hispanic – some of the people that I gave a chance to participate. I said hey, you guys, come on, because there's work for everything. I always believe that there's work for everybody, except some people I said, don't be a hog. No seas marrano.

HG: So how do you ensure competence?

FD: As far as competence –

HG: In your organization.

FD: In my organization here, well, right now like I said, I'm the guy that holds the quality control. I have some people that help me that I have a lot confidence in because I have worked with them for many years. I know their strengths and I know their weaknesses as far as the engineering. And I know if I give this guy this work, I know what I need to check with him because I have worked with him so many times that this guy's – his weakness, so I better look it up. And I know that because I've done it for so long. So in that sense, I guess [inaudible].

I think there's, as far as designing anything, there's the design and then there's the engineers. Maybe I want to design it this way, that guy wants to design it this way. Not to say that it's wrong, so the only thing that will make a difference is – my motto in the city was we shouldn't be discussing engineering, how we're going to engineer it. We should be discussing costs because that's one of the problems, more than anything else. Because I can design anything you want me to as long as you have the money to pay for it.

And I don't mean me, I mean building it. But if I'm gonna build a house and I only have \$20.00, then I have to build you a house that is worth \$20.00, that you can build for \$20.00. That's the thing. If you say you have \$20.00 and I design you a \$100.00 house, well, you're not going to do it. So, and I always tell these people, listen, not to concentrate on the engineering. I think engineering can do whatever it needs to be done. Concentrate on how you're gonna pay for it.

When I was in the city I used to just tell them hey, this is not an engineering problem. It's a funding problem. You give us the money.

You want us to send you on a rocket to the moon; I will send you on a rocket to the moon. Just give me the resources.

HG: So how do you translate that to your business?

FD: To my business, I try to give my customers a good design that is the best design for the dollar. How am I gonna make it more economical to my client? Instead of costing them \$100.00, can I design it for \$80.00?

HG: Does your customer understand that and appreciate that?

FD: Yes, they do.

HG: Would you say that's the secret to your success?

FD: Probably, because I've seen some people that keep coming back and the other thing is that I have a rate for my services and I don't – what's the word – don't go back and forth, can you do it? I tell the guy, you want me to do this for you, it's gonna cost you X number of dollars. And it's like, well, can you do it for Y? No, but this guy over here he said he can do it for less. Go to him.

I don't feel offended. I tell them. You do not offend me if you go to him because this is a business decision that you're gonna make and you make the best business decision for you that you want. This is gonna do it for you, fine. This is what it's worth to me. And a lot of people come back.

HG: Let me ask you, what do you consider your biggest victory?

FD: In life?

HG: Yeah.

FD: When I was in Corning with my family; my family. I've been very blessed with all my family. Ni uno de mis chavalos me dio problemas, gracias a Dios. And I was very fortunate. I see some of my buddies; they have problems with their kids. Boy, I said shit. How fortunate am I?

HG: So where did you learn how to be a good parent?

FD: I don't know, maybe it's just seeing my grandfather, my mother. And I told my kids, if I make a mistake fine, but I raise you the way I was raised. And if it was bad, well then it was bad. But if it worked for me it should work for you. So I tell you, it worked for me and now my kids are – they used to say that I was a very strict person with them, very strict. And I was, since I didn't give them a lot of slack. I was always on top of them. Now they thank me but at the time they thought I was the meanest guy there way. Now that they grow old, they say hey dad, thank you.

HG: So you hold people accountable?

FD: Yeah, but at the time I remember my – I have three girls. You know one of the biggest discussions we had? They wanted to grow up too fast. They're 12 and they want to look 20 and I said no mija, I'm your dad and you're gonna be a little girl for only a very, very short time. It's my job to make sure you have that time. When you grow you can do whatever the hell you want but you're gonna be an adult for the rest of your life.

But you're gonna be a little girl only for this much time and I have to give you the opportunity to be a little girl. They went, dad, my friend – she wears high heels; she uses lipstick. Hey, I'm not her dad. I can't do nothing about

your friend but you're my daughter and you're gonna be a little girl.
Whether you like it or not, you're gonna be a little girl.

HG: So do you run your business like your home?

FD: Yeah, more or less.

HG: Do you establish the values?

FD: I establish some values. Very straight, I don't lie to people. I tell them the facts. If they don't like to hear it then – viene una señora y me dice, **[inaudible]** que no lo haga. Le va a costar más de lo que usted piensa. Yo le digo, si lo va a hacer, lo va a hacer. Pero I still feel that I still run a very small firm.

HG: Okay. What's a big firm?

FD: I would say when you have 10 or 12 or more people in your payroll, you start getting into a medium. I know **Snowden** that I consider one of the biggest firms in town, that at one time had something like 50 employees.

HG: So Snowden **[inaudible]**.

FD: It's a good firm.

HG: **[Inaudible]**.

FD: But right now he has laid almost half of them already and to me that would probably be the hardest thing for me to do; to tell somebody, especially if they depend on the wages for their survival. I think I would find it very difficult. Right now because I have a lot of the retirees, and I

like that and they understand that when we have work, we have work and when we don't have work, we don't have work. It's no problem.

HG: But they're not depending on it?

FD: No, but they're not depending on it. I have only about three people that depend on it, my son being one of them. And I have other two people and I would hate to tell them, hey, **[inaudible]**.

HG: So that's the business model you've adopted.

FD: Yeah.

HG: And it works for you?

FD: Yeah, it works for me. And I will always tell my son, just be a simple person. Life is not complicated, don't make it complicated. Life is very simple. Keep it simple. When life becomes complicated it's because people make it complicated.

HG: You named your firm Dorado Engineering, after your last name.

FD: Right.

HG: Did you have any thoughts when you were naming your firm, any **[inaudible]**?

FD: No. The only thought I had is que no hubiera otro igual. You know how you have to check. Joe Lopez me hizo el –

HG: Your logo.

FD: Logo, and I told him I want a very simple logo. I don't want a very complicated logo; just a very simple card. And he came out with the lettering and then Dorado.

HG: Engineers, surveyors and planners. So what is your corporate message?

FD: I don't understand what you mean by corporate message.

HG: What do you tell your customers? How do your customers see you?

FD: That I give them the best service I can give and they're gonna get the best service. And briskly, I deal with them very, very straight. I had the fortune of meeting this guy in [inaudible]. And I met him by – he called me and he wanted me to do something for him that I'm not qualified to do. And he said, well, you can do it if you want to. I'm not qualified to do it and I don't want to give you a wrong product. You want to do that – he wanted me to do something electrical. If I recommend you an electrical – okay.

He said, you know, you're one of the very few guys that tells me that. He said, most people say, yeah, we'll do it. You're the first guy to tell me you don't want to do it. I said well, because I can't. I'm not qualified to do so and I don't want to be responsible if something happens to your apartments. He said okay, tell you what, you get me an electrical; you and charge me for it. Okay, I can do that.

So I went to one of the guys in electrical, hizo el trabajo. Él le hizo el trabajo y yo le cobre por ir. Every time there's work at [inaudible] I get it. He calls me and I know very well his records y todo y me dice. He calls me and we do it. We don't even discuss a price. He feels confident that I'm gonna give

him a good price, and I do, what it costs me. As a matter of fact, right now we're fixing the – lo que se quemó.

HG: The one that burned.

FD: Yeah. I'm gonna start demolishing the roof today or tomorrow. So I'm working because on the phone – he never showed up. He just called me hey, go over there and see what's the problem and what's the recommendation. Okay, I make the recommendation. I had to hire an electrical, mechanical, I did. I sent him a bill. For us it's just good, he trusts me. It's trust; you get the work when people trust you. And there's some other little customers que tengo que también me hablan a mi. Do it, so I'll do it. And then we have this thing that you develop with the customers.

HG: So are most of your customers repeat customers?

FD: Yes, most of them are repeat. More than once, more than twice. Y luego, pues, it also helped that when I was a city engineer I also have a lot of credibility. Everybody that dealt with me, that I was gonna do that. It's great. So that helps.

HG: You have a reputation, a good reputation?

FD: Yes and even some that when I got out they said, when you were there sometimes we didn't like what you told us but we knew we were gonna get an answer. Now you go over there, you know how long it takes you? Months to get an answer. So when we were over there, we said well, you want it approved this is what you need to do, one, two, three.

And sometimes we didn't agree with you and we argued with you and you argued with us but in the end we came to an agreement and we went with it. So that helped. A lot of people knew me from the engineering department and I never treated anybody wrong. I might disagree with them but I would never do something bad to anybody. I never pushed my weight around.

My employees, they like me because I never abuse them. Todos quieren parar conmigo. And I say, you're always welcome to come and talk to me. Y cuando hacían algo mal les hablaba hey, vente acá. You're not doing it right. You're doing this wrong, you need to correct it. I always talk very straight with them, with my business people too. And that's the thing that I want my son to know.

HG: Do you have any partners or is it just you?

FD: It's just me. My wife, I guess, because she's the vice president.

HG: Does she get involved with the business?

FD: No, not at all. Solo soy yo. When we started, she said, well, I can go help you. I said no. I want to come home and I want to be happy to see you.

HG: How many years have you been married?

FD: 45. Le digo, I want to come home and I want to be happy to see you.

HG: And you've received some awards over the years?

FD: I received several awards; a lot of awards.

HG: What was the last award you received?

FD: The last award I received was from Alicia Chacon and the farm workers.
El Sembrador?

HG: Yes.

FD: And I really liked that one.

HG: And why did you get that award?

FD: I was very much involved with Carlos in the establishment of the center.

HG: Carlos Varetes –?

FD: Si.

HG: – who ran the –?

FD: He still runs it.

HG: The farm workers thing.

FD: Farm workers. I was the one that helped him get this in.

HG: Helped him get –?

FD: The funding, get funds, design it and build it.

HG: And they got money through the city?

FD: Got money through the communities, community development. I helped him with it. Helped him get funded, helped him design it and helped him construct it.

HG: That was under Mayor Tilney?

FD: Yes.

HG: Yeah, Tilney got an award at the same time you got yours.

FD: Yes. No, he got it a year later.

HG: A year later.

FD: But yeah, he was very much in it, Tilney. It just happened at the right time. Tilney was there and he was very sympathetic to the farm workers. It should be some other because this happened. I feel good and I was always helping Carlos [inaudible].

HG: The director of the farmer center.

FD: Yeah, he always calls me when he needs a donation. It was the last one.

HG: Do you do a lot of donating?

FD: Yes. As a matter of fact, Alicia Chacon, I tell her once in a while send me a paying customer. She sends me a lot of people who are coming up.

HG: She is a former county judge.

FD: Huh?

HG: She is a former county judge.

FD: Si, and we have developed a very, very good relationship. When I met Alicia I was at Utech.

HG: Really?

FD: I was still a student at Utech and Alicia came to talk to the student body. She was running for the Ysleta School Board and she asked for volunteers and I volunteered. And I met her and she won. The first Hispanic and the first mujer elected to the Ysleta School Board. And we've been friends ever since.

HG: You worked door to door for her?

FD: Yes. In all her campaigns. Todo el tiempo he estado con ella.

HG: In all her campaigns.

FD: As a matter of fact, my wife tells me, don't you ever say no to Alicia? And I said no.

HG: Not too many people do.

FD: Right; so every time. And I have lunch with her about every other month. We get together, we have lunch and we talk. We have become very good friends through the years.

HG: Well Fermin, I certainly appreciate your taking time to share with me your story. Any ideas, anything you'd like to share to finish off?

FD: No, I hope you do well on what you're doing. I think it takes a lot of your time to do what you're doing and it takes a lot of patience to listen to all of us. Probably hear this story over again.

HG: Different ways.

FD: Different ways. We probably have the same story.

HG: How do you mean that?

FD: Well, I'm assuming we all came from very humble places and we fought and we worked hard in order to go up the ladders. We probably did it different ways but we always have the same story. I know that all my people that I know that are very successful, have gone through it. And I tell my son, look around my friends, look at the people that are very successful, son. You know what they have in common? They're all hard workers. That's their common denominator. All these people that you have seen that have done very well, they're all very hard workers.

HG: So that's the common key you see to success?

FD: Yes, be a hard worker. Hard work gets compensated; sooner or later it gets compensated.

HG: Is hard work long hours or is it –?

FD: Well, no. I think hard work means you dedicate yourself to what you want. Work for it. I tell you, when I was going to school I was – 21 hours. I used to spend a lot of time studying. There were some times I didn't sleep all night. I'd stay studying but I wanted to do it. Even your

mom, I said, your mom used to complain that she couldn't compete with the books because I kind of neglected her because I was studying.

And she would come and say hey, I'm over here. And I used to tell her, just wait; I'll make it up to you. I'll make it up. And I did. So that's what it takes, dedication. Como decía este maestro, it's 90 percent dedication and 10 percent hard work. **[Inaudible]** 90 percent dedication. You want to do it? You do it. If you want to do it, you do it. If you don't want to do it, you're gonna find 1,000 reasons why you can't do it.

HG: So wanting to do it is –?

FD: Wanting to do it; and being true to yourself. Not a lot of us are capable of doing things that we're not capable. I knew I could not be an astronaut, so why go there, right? Como decía él, know your limitations. Watching a movie una vez– know your – Clint Eastwood, a man doesn't know his limitations or something like that. Yeah, know your limitations. You want to be president of the United States? First of all, can you do it? And if the answer is yes, well go for it.

HG: Who are your heroes?

FD: My heroes? I guess my heroes – I always admire – Alicia was one of my heroes. I admire her very much.

HG: Alicia Chacon, yeah.

FD: I admire – you're not gonna believe this but I admire Jonathan Rogers.

HG: The ex-mayor of El Paso.

FD: Yes, I did.

HG: Tell me about him.

FD: He was a man who was very determined and he was also very straight.

HG: A lot of people said he was an Anglo—?

FD: He was very – and his defense was his aggressiveness. He used to hide behind his being aggressive, being an ass. To me that was his [inaudible]. We understood that. We got along with him beautiful and he was a very strict man.

HG: So why did you like him?

FD: Because he was very straight. I don't like you and I don't like you. I don't like you Fermin. Fuck you, I don't like you either. So what's next?

HG: Did he ever tell you that?

FD: Yeah. So one time, the first time I met him I was coming to work in the morning. And the first time I saw him he had just taken over being the mayor of El Paso and he used to come very early to work, about 7:00 a.m. And we're walking into the elevator together and then I turned around and I said, good morning Mayor, congratulations.

He turns around and looks at me like, who the fuck are you? He does not know me. Fuck you, he told me that. That shut the hell out me. You're in the elevator. Y llegamos al fourth floor and I was gonna get out at the fourth floor. Mayor, have a good morning and fuck you too. We got along after that. So the mayor wanted to know who the hell you are. Beasley.

HG: Dr. Beasley, he was a good assistant.

FD: The mayor wanted to know who the hell I was. I said why? What happened? After that I got along with him fine and he would tell me, you know, I don't like you Fermin. I don't like what you're doing to my friends. I said Mayor, I don't like you either and if you don't like what I'm doing to your friends change the ordinance. You have the authority to change it.

HG: What ordinance?

FD: The land development. All his friends were land developers. I said, I'm just enforcing the ordinance. If you don't like the ordinance, change it.

HG: And he didn't like what you were doing to his friends how?

FD: Because I would make them do this and make them do that, spend more money and do the right thing. A lot of people asked me, what it takes for you to approve it? Just do it right; that's all it takes.

HG: So do it right, is that your – that's your message?

FD: Do it right. My wife doesn't understand why I like Jonathan. He was – I always knew what was in his mind when it came to me, anyway.

HG: How did he treat Hispanics?

FD: He treated me well. He always treated me with a lot of respect. He always treated me with a lot of respect, especially when some people would walk into his office to complain about me. He would always treat

me very [inaudible]. He would tell them, Fermin is the engineer and he's in charge and he knows what he's doing. You have a problem with that? No Mayor. Okay. Pues todo el tiempo me trató muy bien.

HG: And he was there for –?

FD: Eight years. Y para [inaudible]. As a matter of fact, he appointed me city engineer.

HG: Oh, he did?

FD: It was during his first term or second term that he appointed me city engineer. Shocked the hell out of me; and I liked working for him, one of the few guys that I enjoyed working with.

HG: Anybody else a hero?

FD: I already told you my grandfather, my father, just family that's part of the political scene. I guess I was growing up as a – I always admired Mr. Telles, the mayor.

HG: Richard Telles, the mayor.

FD: [Inaudible] people that I admire for making it, especially with all the adversity he had.

HG: He was mayor in the 50's, first Hispanic mayor. And you knew him?

FD: I know him now. At the time I was just somebody up there.

HG: You admire him?

FD: Yeah. I got to meet him later on but especially if I read his story. He came from a lot of adversity and he came from very humble too; very humble beginnings. He **[inaudible]**,

HG: Great. Well, I certainly –

FD: **[inaudible]** pues, and thank you for taking the time and I enjoyed it.

HG: Thank you. Stop.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 96 minutes

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