

2-11-2009

## **Interview no. 1524**

Ricardo Villarreal

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Interview with Ricardo Villarreal by Edmundo Valencia, 2009, "Interview no. 1524," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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## THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Ricardo Villarreal

Interviewer: Edmundo Valencia

Project: Hispanic Entrepreneurs Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: February 11, 2009

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Transcript No.: 1524

Transcriber / Summary: Pamela Krch

Ricardo Villarreal parlayed the knowledge he gained working as an electrician for the United States Navy during the Vietnam War into several successful El Paso businesses. Under the umbrella of Villarreal and Sons Enterprises, a company he began twenty-five years ago, he and his family now operate Villarreal and Sons Electric, Alpha Tech ELP, Alpha Tech C.E., and Greengo Alternative Energy. In this interview, Villarreal remembers his early experiences working as a busboy for El Paso's Grigg's Restaurant. After landing the job at the age of thirteen, he so impressed the owner with his work ethic that within a month all six of the other busboys had been terminated, leaving Villarreal as the sole busser. Villarreal maintained this tremendous work ethic when he entered the Navy after high school. Calling his military service a "tremendous experience," he took advantage of every opportunity to learn. Eventually, the Navy assigned Villarreal the position of small U-boat electrician during the war. Post-war, Villarreal trained for two years as a Navy SEAL, although injuries from a car accident ended that dream prematurely. After his 1979 discharge, he enrolled in college under the G.I. Bill to study electrical engineering, ultimately completing his degree at the University of Texas at El Paso. Although NASA offered him a job at their Goddard Facility while still a student at UTEP, Villarreal chose instead to stay in El Paso, his birthplace and hometown, and start his own business. Villarreal goes on to describe his companies' many services and functions, as well as his own passion for training and teaching top-notch electricians. He also discusses his employment policies, and talks at some length about the business climate of El Paso, the "hardest market in the United States."

Name of Interviewee: Ricardo Villarreal  
Date of Interview: February 11, 2009  
Name of Interviewer: Edmundo Valencia

This is an interview with Rick Villarreal on February 11, 2009 in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Edmundo Valencia. This interview is part of the El Paso Del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project.

EV: Mr. Villarreal, when and where were you born?

RV: I was born here in El Paso on January 24, 1953.

EV: And where did you grow up?

RV: I grew up here in El Paso in Hacienda Heights.

EV: And what were your parents' names?

RV: My mother's name is Dolores Shancor Villarreal. My father's name is Salvador Villarreal.

EV: And what were their occupations?

RV: My mother mostly was a housewife. She did work for an optical company. My father was a carpenter in the beginning, and then he worked for an insurance company.

EV: And what was the optical company?

RV: It was Goff Optical, Dr. Dean Goff.

EV: Do you know what she did there?

RV: Dispense glasses.

EV: And your father, as a carpenter, did he get formal training or how did he become a—

RV: On-the-job training.

EV: Did he go to school or as a trade?

RV: No, he learned it working for companies here in El Paso. He worked for Champ's Aviation.

EV: And later on, he went to—I'm sorry, you said?

RV: Insurance business.

EV: Insurance.

RV: He worked for National Life Insurance Company, as an insurance salesman.

EV: Do know around what time was that, the year more or less?

RV: The year, let me see, I was born in '53, and I used to go with him to go sell and collect insurance when I was a kid, so late '50s and the '60s until the early '70s.

EV: And how was that experience going with him, what do you think you learned from that, watching him?

RV: That I didn't wanna be an insurance salesman. (laughter) No, he was very hardworking. I learned a lot from watching my father just by watching his mannerisms, how he reacted with people. As a salesman, how he sold insurance to them, how he carried himself, how he dressed, that helped me tremendously.

EV: He had been in the navy, right?

RV: Yes, he was also in the navy, in World War II.

EV: And your grandfather as well or just your father?

RV: No, my father was navy. He was part of the occupation in Japan in the Second World War.

EV: And what was the primary language spoken at your house?

RV: Up until we got into kindergarten, it was Spanish. Both of my parents were both born and raised here in the United States, my mother up in Sacramento, my father here in El Paso. They were both educated here, so they were bilingual, but they spoke to us in Spanish at home because they knew that as soon as we entered elementary school, we would be thrown into the English, and from then on, we would speak English. So I'm very grateful that they did speak to us in Spanish because it's been a great advantage to be bilingual in Spanish and English.

EV: Will you tell me about your education. Where did you go to elementary up to high school.

RV: I started elementary in Hacienda Heights Elementary School. I went from kindergarten to the eighth grade there. I went to Bel Air High School from the ninth to the twelfth. I went off into the navy in 1970. I was an electrician's mate. I went to several electrical and leadership schools. I got out of the navy in 1979. I worked up in Oregon for Mid-Coast Industries in a company called Mid-Coast Electric. I started there, and shortly after that, after I got out of the navy, I went back into college, and I started community college up in Oregon. And after I finished there, I transferred, when we moved back to El Paso, I continued here at

UTEP. And so my education has been primarily in the electrical fields, electrical engineering and physics.

EV: Did you get a degree from the Community College at Portland?

RV: Well, they didn't call it degrees, but what they would have equivalent here, they would, I guess, you would call it some kind of a degree.

EV: I'm sorry, was it Oregon?

RV: Yeah, it was Oregon; it was Coos Bay, Oregon.

EV: And what was the name? Do you remember the exact name of the community college?

RV: Southwestern Oregon Community College.

EV: So when you started here at UTEP, did you begin as a freshman? Did you transfer any credits?

RV: No, I transferred quite a few credits. I can't remember how many there were, maybe about thirty or forty credits and continued here in Engineering and Physics.

EV: Were you a double major?

RV: Yeah, basically, I started out with a double E, and then I switched over to a Physics Major, but kept my double E, because I found that my true interest lied in Physics. The schools that I had in the navy had prepared me quite well that when I went to engineering school, it was quite easy for me that I wanted a deeper understanding, so all of the double E professors would tell me that I had to talk to

a physicist. And when I got into physics, I found that that's what my true love was.

EV: And while at school, and now that you look back at it, how would you rate the quality of the education, did it help you in your business?

RV: Overall, yes. What helped me probably a tremendous amount was my training in the navy because of the discipline, the procedures. The navy is very heavy on procedure and protocol, and you learn a lot, and you get a lot of discipline. Also, on physical appearance, the way you carry yourself, in the navy, was very important to look a certain way and act a certain way. And I found that was very important here starting my business. Also of my electrical training in the navy helped me in my electrical business. My engineering training allowed me to enter other areas that just as a electrician may have not offered me, but because of my physics background, it opened up a lot of doors for me.

EV: When you were at the navy, did you choose to get that sort of training or how did that happen?

RV: Yeah, when I joined the navy, they asked me if I wanted to go into computer science, or it was called data processing at the time, or in the electrical. Well, I always had a fascination with electricity, so I asked to go in the electric field, and when I went to my first school in San Diego, it was a three-month electrical school, Electrician's Mate "A" School. Prior to that, it was Electricity and Electronics Prep School. And I went to some other schools throughout my career in the navy.

EV: And going back to your growing up here in El Paso, what were your first jobs? Well, you mentioned you would go with your dad. Did you have any early jobs?

RV: Yeah, I was probably about seven years old when I started mowing the lawns for people. The lawnmower was taller than me, and it was an old push mower. It wasn't a gas or electric mower. And so my father showed me how to use that at home, and that's what I would do, I'd go mow people's lawns. And then later on, because of my parents' involvement to the church, they were both presidents of the organizations, for fundraisers, they would put on raffles. And so I learned how a raffle would work, how they made the tickets, so I would take my own toys, and I would raffle them off. So I'd go door to door selling tickets, and so I'd raffle off my tickets, and I've always worked ever since I was a young child, I've always liked working.

EV: And that was out of your early initiative, you decided to go ahead and do that.

RV: Uh-huh, actually, I guess it's because I have that kind of drive, but watching my parents the way they would run the bazaars at the church, all their fundraisers, everything both my mother and father did showed me how to do it. It was easy, and all I did was just incorporate my ideas in order to raise money for myself.

EV: Did they ever operate a business of their own?

RV: No, but in my history, my mother's father, who was from India, **Natun Lamara** was his name, he was a businessman up in Sacramento, California, and he was a rice grower. He came into this country around 1910 and that time, and he was a rice grower, and we were told he may have also had a hotel or something up in Sacramento. I never knew him. He died in 1928. And my father's father, who I also didn't know, his name was Salvador Portugal (??), and he was a businessman in Juárez. And he owned those Servicios del Norte, The Jockey Club in Zaragoza. He owned several businesses there, but I never knew him. And so I wasn't raised around a business environment, but, both, because the way my parents carried themselves, and what they did in helping the church, it gave me an idea of how to make money. I thought it was pretty easy. What I call my first



real job, was at Griggs Restaurant on Montana Street. I just graduated from the eighth grade. I guess I was gonna be thirteen years old, somewhere around there or I had just turned thirteen, but that was my first, what I call my real job where I was getting paid by someone else.

EV: What did you do there?

RV: I was a busboy, and when the owner saw how fast I worked, and how efficient I worked, I've always liked working, and I was always learned that if you can learn a technique, and just keep that technique, you can accelerate the speed and the proficiency of any job. And so in busing tables, and cleaning tables, and picking up the plates and stuff, I learned a technique to do it very fast, and I've always been a fast walker, kind of hyper person. So there were seven busboys working in that restaurant, within about a month, I was the only busboy there. He fired them all because he knew I could handle the entire restaurant by myself. And then summertime came, and he asked me if I wanted to work more hours and I did. And so what I did there was I started cleaning the restaurant, the vacuuming, and mopping, and cleaning the kitchen. And so he had the dishwasher, who was an older man, come in and do that when he kept me from doing that because he was paying only fifty cents an hour. And then he fired the dishwasher, so I would come in, I would bus the tables, I would wash the dishes, I would clean the restaurant, and I would work seven days a week, I loved it. I was working sixty, seventy hours a week, easy, and then the Child Labor people—because I was too young, came in to tell him something. When he told me about it, I told him I didn't care about that. I wanted to work. And so his interest was sending me to college, so he wanted to send me to Texas Tech, so that I could open a Griggs restaurant in Mexico, a full restaurant for them in Lubbock. I was still working for him as a junior in high school [and] I met this girl, who later on, I married. But when I met her, I wanted to spend more time with her, and he didn't like that because I was taking time away from him, so he was trying to discourage me from being with her. And so finally, I quit working for him, and in my junior year, I

was part of the Distributive Education, there, at Bel Air High School. And in 1969, I guess, when I took that class, and what you would do there is you would work half a day, and you would go to school half a day, but it was geared to teach you about business, and so I enjoyed it very much. I learned a lot from Mr. Miller, who was our instructor, and really, that's where I met my wife, Linda. She was a year ahead of me. She was also in DE; she also loved to work. And so when I quit Griggs Restaurant, I went to work for Safeway on McRae and the Gateway there. And Linda worked right next door when it used to be Grant's Department Store. She worked right next door to the Safeway. So on our breaks, we used to drink coffee together there. Grant's used to have a coffee bar there inside the store. But I worked for Safeway until I graduated from high school, when I joined the navy, and then I left for the navy.

EV: So you were there in your senior year and part of junior, junior and senior?

RV: Uh-huh. Yeah, most of my junior year, and all of my senior year, I was at Safeway.

EV: And going back a little bit, what was the name of the owner of that restaurant?

RV: The original owner was Edgar Griggs, and he had the original Griggs Restaurant on Doniphan Street, but his mother was a Mexican lady, who lived in New Mexico, in Las Cruces, and they opened the La Posta Restaurants. And so it was the same New Mexican style food that La Posta serves today that the Griggs Restaurant served, and there were two in El Paso, there was Griggs on Doniphan, and the new one that was opened in around '67 or '68. It was brand new when I started, was opened on Montana.

EV: And this man wanted to support you to go to college? Do you know what were his plans? You said he wanted you to open another restaurant, but did he want you to go into a specific career, in a specific field.

RV: Yeah, he wanted to send me to Texas Tech because he saw how fast I worked, how efficient, and how trustworthy. In fact, I remember him giving me the combination to the safe because he was going to be going out of town, his wife was pregnant. It was a floor safe, so she couldn't get down to open it, so he gave me the combination. I would open the restaurant, I would close the restaurant, I would take in all the food deliveries, and I was probably about, at that point, maybe about fifteen years old.

EV: Did he want you to study business?

RV: Yes, I think it was more of restaurant management, that type of stuff. But he had told me one day that he wanted to send me to college to do that.

EV: And what did you think about that at the time before you met your future wife?

RV: I thought it was pretty good. I didn't really have an interest in going to college. I wanted to go off to the navy. I already knew I was gonna go off to the navy because I grew up with my father telling me about his adventures in the navy during his occupation in Japan, and how friendly the Japanese people were, how beautiful it was over there. And so I already knew what I was gonna do. I was not gonna go to college right out of high school. I was gonna go off to the navy, and conquer the world. When he told me about it, I thought it was nice, but I never really thought much more than that.

EV: And what would you consider that you learned working for him?

RV: I did learn about more, I guess, techniques that I had developed in cleaning. I would make my own formulas and concoctions to clean the range hoods in the kitchen, which were probably lethal, toxic stuff. I didn't know. But I learned how he ran the business, and how the restaurant business worked. I thought it

was pretty easy. I learned how he dealt with people just by watching him because Griggs Restaurant, at that time, was not a restaurant where the Mexican community in El Paso would go. Mexicans worked there in the kitchen, and as busboys, but the waitresses, I don't remember—well, there were two. There were two girls that were in DE with me, friends that I knew since we were kids; they were *Mexicana también*. They both worked there. But other than that, they were usually Anglo or white women that worked as waitresses, and they were older. All the clientele was white, and pretty well off because it wasn't typical Mexican food that you eat in El Paso. It was more what they call New Mexican food. It had a little different flavor, and it was a type of place it catered to them. And so I got to see how white people acted in that type of environment. I saw how he acted with them, and it showed me how two American Anglos interacted, and even though I grew up in El Paso in a neighborhood that was very well mixed, it was very, well, segregated—no, not segregated—

EV: Diverse city.

RV: Very diverse, yes, and I had a lot of, not only black, but Anglo friends. I got to see the business side because all of these people were pretty well-off, businessmen here in El Paso. So I learned quite a bit from that experience.

EV: Would you describe that interaction that you saw from the owner with the customers?

RV: It was polite, it was different than when you saw two, what we would call, Mexicanos. I'm talking about Americans born and raised in the United States, but of Mexican ancestry. Different in the way they communicate, and the way they carry on, and I grew up in a house where all the friends were *compadres*, *unos tíos*, *tías*, so the interaction was different. And even my father, when he went to sell insurance down in the lower valley down in Ysleta, Socorro, San Eli, all the way to Fabens, whether they were some black families, very few, or Anglo

families or Mexican families, I got to see the way my father dealt with them. And I did see differences, when he would deal with the black family and a white family versus when he would deal with a Mexican family because more of familiarity with the Mexican family, and that's the way El Paso is, like just one giant family. And when I saw up at Griggs, John Duke was very cordial, very polite with them. It wasn't the same. It wasn't the same interaction with white with white, as it was Mexican with Mexican. Mexican with Mexican it was more like, even though they didn't know each other, once they started talking, it became more like family, but with the whites, it was more business, it was more professional. And also, the way they treated their children, the way they acted. Even though I used to spend the night at a friends' houses when I was kid that were Anglo, I got to see how they lived, which I thought was very interesting. They were cowboy-type families, you know, very interesting.

EV: And once you were in the navy, would you describe what your training [was] like, your learning experiences there?

RV: I volunteered for all kinds of work. I never liked staying still and being still. I wanted to learn. I wanted to master the electrical field, the electrical trade, and so I would volunteer for schools, I would volunteer for all kinds of assignments. For example, onboard ship, I worked in the power shop where we were working on the motors, the controls, the generators, [and] all the power distribution systems for the entire ship. And I used to work on all of the bakery equipment. I would work on all of the kitchen equipment, the giant ovens, everything that was electrical. I would work on the barbers' equipment. I would work on all of the giant laundry equipment. I volunteered to work on everything because I wanted to master it; I wanted to know everything. And so that helped me because unlike many other sailors that didn't wanna work, I was different. Of course, I was the only Mexican too in the electrical division onboard one of my ships. In fact, in all of my ships, and most of my commands, I was the only Mexican, even though I don't consider myself Mexican. I'm American of Mexican ancestry, but I'm also

Hindu ancestry and Indian ancestry, but it's just the way you're seen there. And so I was always seen as a person who liked to work and that helped me advance tremendously. And so in the navy, I would, like I said, I would volunteer to go to repair motors, control systems, work on the generators, on distribution, everything, anything that was electrical. I had to get my hands in it to learn it. We had these giant elevators for taking vehicles from down in the belly of the ship up to the main deck, and so these were very large control systems that I would work on. It was a tremendous experience. I really enjoyed it. I never really joined the navy. I volunteered for Vietnam because my four years of high school, I was also in ROTC, and I was in the drill team. I was very patriotic. And growing up in El Paso, which is a very patriotic city, I didn't know anybody that was burning their draft cards or dodging the draft or leaving the country. Everybody here was volunteering to go to Vietnam. So I volunteered, but I never really thought that I would join the navy to kill anybody. I wanted to join the navy just to get away from home, see the world, and learn something, and so I volunteered, like I said, for every single assignment that was ever put out, I would volunteer for it. And I did very well because one of my deployments overseas, on my way back, out of all of the members of my ship, which were about nine hundred sailors and about twelve hundred marines, I was offered a position on a polar icebreaker to go down to Antarctica. And I was the only one being offered that position, but it was because of my record. And I declined it because I had already been away from my wife and my son for nine months, and so that was one decline, my first decline, actually, in the navy. And from there, I went into Balboa Naval Hospital where they operated on my right eye. I came out of there, I went to Assault Craft Unit 1, and these were the small U-boats that would land the troops and the tanks and stuff on shore during war, and I was the electrician on those. There was only one electrician per U-boat, and so I used to work on everything on that boat also. And I was the kind of person that I'd get on the boat, on the U-boat, and I would have to go from the front of the boat to the back of the boat, from forward to aft (before it left??), to repair, and make sure everything was brand new because I didn't wanna have to work on anything when

it was underway. I just wanted it that way. And so I got a very good reputation there also. I trained two years in the navy to go into the Seal Team, the Navy Special Forces, and I got orders instead of going to training, I got orders to Oregon, to Coos Bay, Oregon. And so I took my family out there thinking that someday I would return to San Diego, and to go through training for the Seal Team, and while I was up there, I was in Coos Head, Oregon Naval Facility, that's what it was called, right on the coast up there in Oregon. I thought that I would return to San Diego, but in 1978, I had a head-on collision, and it damaged my knees, and my back, and my right eye again, so that took me out of the running for Seal Team. That was a dream that was lost also. But up in Coos Head, I was in charge the entire electrical system on the base, and I had men that I would train under me. I was always very big in training. I always liked to train, and so that was my last duty station in the navy. I got out of the navy, up there, in 1979 and started working for Mid Coast Electric. I worked for Mid Coast Electric until—I think I must've worked for about a year, a year-and-a-half. I worked in construction up there. That was my introduction to the construction field. And I got back into college, I left work, I got back into college, at that time, to study electrical engineering up there.

EV: What differences did you find coming from the navy and working there into the outside world? What differences in the field did you find?

RV: I found that the navy's training's superior, far superior. I found many men in the navy that didn't wanna learn, that didn't wanna study, that didn't wanna work. And when I got out in the, what we call the real world in the navy, in the civilian world, I found guys that were licensed, but their knowledge of the electrical theory was very limited. In the navy, you had to be very strong and proficient in theory. They were more construction electricians. It was different. The codes, they used the National Electrical Code, when in the navy, we didn't use that code. We used the Marine Code. And so I found that the environment was completely different. The navy was very professional, and you had to look a certain way, act

a certain way. On the outside, you could look any way you want to, and it didn't matter. And so I wanted to be a master electrician, when I came out of the navy, but I didn't know how to gauge myself. But when I came out of the navy, and I went to work for Mid Coast, and I was working under a master electrician, and I was working under journeyman, I found that I did come out as a master. I came out with a very high education, very, very good quality education, and tremendous experience because none of the men that I worked with, there at Mid Coast, had the kind of experience I had. They had the construction experience over me, but I learned that even at the naval facility in Oregon. I realized that in the electrical field, construction is mechanical; it's not electrical. Bending pipe, pulling wire, putting in boxes is all mechanical, and so I learned that right away. Again, going back to my early training at Griggs Restaurant, I learned technique to clean a table. I learned the technique to wire a building, and I did them all the same, wiring an house or a commercial building was no different. And I thought it was, to me, it was kind of boring and mundane, so I preferred to do troubleshooting, which, to me, was more challenging.

EV: And just to clear that up, what is the hierarchy in the electrician field?

RV: Well, you start off as an apprentice, and the apprenticeship is for four years. You can be an on-the-job training apprentice, and never go to school or you can be an apprentice registered with the Department of Labor under the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training. And you can go as an indentured(??) apprentice, and go to school for four years, while you're also working for four years. And upon graduation, you are now eligible to take your journeyman license. Most states have a journeyman license program that requires you to be a journeyman in the field for four years before you can go for your master's license. And once you get your master's license, most states require that in order for you to be able to pull permits, and oversee men. As a journeyman, you can oversee an apprentice, but you cannot contract work, you cannot really do design work. As a master electrician, you can contract work, you can design work, you oversee the



journeyman, [and] you oversee the apprentice. Basically, you can start your business at that point.

EV: Is that the highest type of license?

RV: Master Electrician, yes. Now, in the electrical construction industry, you have business licenses. In Texas, we have what's called the Electrical Contracting License and the Electrician's Master's License. You have to have both of them in order to be in business. In the State of New Mexico, you have what's called the License C (E??) license, which is the business license, and you have what they call a Fine Party license, which is the Master's license. And you have to have both of those in order to go to business. You can have the Master's license, but then you would have to marry it to a business license, so you would have to hire somebody that would bring in their business license in order to be able to operate a business.

EV: And going back to Portland, so what made you decide to go to school, once you got out of the navy, and had experience in the real world.

RV: I don't know. I knew I had to get myself further ahead, I knew that. My goal in the navy was to come out as a First Class Electrician's Mate, which I did out of the navy, but to be a Master, to have mastered the electrical field. And like I said, I couldn't gauge myself until I came out, and when I came out, and worked in private life, in civilian life, I realized I had mastered it. I knew I wanted to continue my education at that point, and I had my GI Bill from my service to my country, which helped me pay for my school. My wife was also working. I would work summers wiring houses, and that kind of stuff, but I had decided that I wanted to go back and become an electrical engineer, and that was another goal that I had set. Very young in my life, I was a goal setter. I would always set a goal, and all the short-term goals, I'd accomplished them, and long-term goals.

The only goal that I did not accomplish was to become a Navy Seal because of the accident I was in.

EV: And how many years did you go to the community college?

RV: I went there about two years, I guess, and then from there, I transferred over to UTEP. In 1985, when I was here at UTEP, President Reagan was in office, and there was a hiring freeze.

The government was not hiring anybody. And one day, I had gotten a call from this gentleman that wanted to interview me. They called me from the Student Union building at UTEP, and said that there were these men from NASA here that wanted to interview me. Because in my forms that I filled out, as my job preferences or my interests, I always put that I wanted to work in the space program in research and development, and that was my first, second and third choice. I had no other choice. And so these two men were coming to El Paso on their way up to New Mexico State because they've got a very good physics program, [inaudible] program. And so they were passing by UTEP, and saw the buildings, and they were very surprised, they were impressed by the buildings, so they decided to go and stop. UTEP was not on their list of schools, so they decided that they would see if they could interview students there. And they did. They interviewed several students, and they told me that they were going around all the United States, and they were gonna hire five students to work at NASA. And since they saw my interest was to work in the space program, they thought I might be interested. When they looked at my records, first, they saw my transcripts, which were very heavy in math and engineering and physics, especially physics, and I was basically a 4.0 student. That interested them, but what interested them, it seemed the most, was all my electrical background. By then, I'd been in the electrical trade about fourteen years, and so they were very interested in the combination of my physics and my electrical. And they told me that they would be calling me to let me know if I was selected. Well, about two weeks to four weeks later, I got a call from the interviewer, who told me that I

was being offered the job that I was the first student in the country to be offered the job, and I turned it down.

EV: Why?

RV: Foolishness, I had just moved back to El Paso. I was going to UTEP, I had been at UTEP already about, maybe three years or so, and I had just bought a house in Anthony, and I just started the soccer league for the kids in Anthony, and just settling down. My two sons were young. They didn't tell me that because the starting pay with NASA was so low, that I wouldn't be able to take my family. When I asked them where it was, they said it was at Goddard Space Center up in Greenbelt, Maryland, right out of Washington, D.C. Well, I had never heard of that area, and so when I went to UTEP one day, went to class, the dean of the physics department or the chairman, rather, of the physics department, Dr. Bruce, came to me, and asked me who I knew in NASA. I said, "No, I don't know anybody." I go, "Why?" He goes, "Because you were offered a job at Goddard." And I said, "So?" He goes, "Goddard is the pinnacle for NASA employees. Everyone that starts at NASA wants to go to Goddard." He goes, "And you're going to start at Goddard." And so, he thought I had some connections. I said, "I didn't know. I thought it was a physics department." Because of the work I was doing there with them, I thought they had recommended me, and because of them, I had been offered the job, and it wasn't because of that. And so, because I had my sons in school, they were young, and just settling down in Anthony, well, I thought they're telling me that the pay will not cover my family moving up there, so I'm gonna have to leave my family again, just like I did when I was in the navy. I didn't wanna deal with that any more. So they told me that whenever I was ready to go up there to give them a call that the door would always be open for me. But things happened, I started my business, I continued with the soccer league in Anthony. After two years, I turned it over to somebody else, and continued growing my business, and that's what I did.

EV: Wow, that's amazing. And now that you touched on your business, what is the name of your present company?

RV: It's Villarreal and Sons Enterprises, and there is a division called Villarreal and Sons Electric, which is the electrical division. We also have another division called Alpha Tech, ELP, and that is a business started basically by my son, Rick, and under Alpha Tech, ELP, they do training security plus different types of trainings for certifications for schools and hospitals and governments, agencies. And we also have Alpha Tech CE, which is the continuing education requirements for electricians in the State of Texas. We were the first provider for the CEs. Our CEUs, as they're called. In fact, my son, Roman got that going, and we continue with that. And we've opened up another division under the alternative energies, it's called GreenGo. Since everything is going green now, we just took the word green and go, and we'll see how that goes for us.

EV: Well, you already described part of your business. What number of employees do you have, services, in addition to the ones you already mentioned, what other services do you do, what products?

RV: Well, we have ten employees. Under the electrical side, we are service contractors. We do troubleshooting primarily. We don't do any big work. We don't work with general contractors. We don't know any general contractors. We'll bid jobs for wiring schools or hospitals. We go out there, and we troubleshoot buildings, machinery, everything. So we have quite an extensive customer base, commercial and industrial. And we also have quite an extensive residential customer base, which is probably only about 10 percent, or so, of our business. But here in El Paso, we service most of the stores and the malls. We service all the 7-Elevens; we service all the Pep Boys, the Toys R Us between Las Cruces and El Paso. And so our field of work, our area on the map, we say, is we go all the way from even Deming. We have companies that are close to Deming. Albuquerque, there's opportunities up there for us, but we've gone down as far as

Marfa, Texas to do work down there for the government, so we're quite extensive, as far as our abilities, and what we offer. Because we can do construction, and we do new construction, but we don't bid, it's all negotiated. If the customer wants us to do it, we give them a price, and we get it done. We do remodel construction of older buildings and even homes, but primarily service work. If someone's got a problem, they call us. If the lights are out, they call us, and we give them (get their??) lights on.

EV: And for how many years has it been in existence?

RV: The Villarreal and Sons Electric started about twenty-five years ago. I actually started working for myself up in Oregon, when I was going to school up there around the end of [the] 1980s, in the summers, I would work for myself. And when I got back to El Paso in 1982, I was working during the summers over at UTEP.

EV: Why did you decide to go into business by yourself?

RV: Well, I think it was summer of '83, maybe it was the summer of '83, I decided to work for an electrical contractor here in El Paso. Because a friend of mine told me that since I had never worked for an electrical contractor here in El Paso that maybe I should, so I could get a taste of what El Paso was like. I did, I worked for this company for the three months, and I realized that, if I was going to feed my family, I was gonna have to be in business for myself because the pay was very low, the conditions were very poor. There were no training opportunities. So I didn't really know any other company. There were some very good companies that I could've gone to work for, but I didn't know about them at the time, and at that time, I decided that I was gonna have to get into business for myself, and that's how I started.

EV: What did you do in the beginning? Did you need any funding to start your business?

RV: No, I had a '65 Chevy Pickup, I had a bunch of old tools that I got from the navy, and I had my two sons. My son Roman, actually, I started working him when he was five years old up in Oregon. I would take him with me to teach him. And my son Rick, who's four years older, was also working with me. He started probably when he was about eight, and when we came back to El Paso, I think it was in the summer of 1982, and Roman was about eight years old, I think at that time, both him and Rick wired their first house. I basically laid it out for them, and they wired it. The general contractor, at that time, who was the father-in-law of the owner, was very surprised to see two boys wiring that house. And then from there, we wired the Chaplain's Lounge off of Executive Boulevard that used to be the Executive Inn. They had a lounge there, both the boys wired it, and they were small. People, again, the other tradesmen were very surprised to see two little kids with tool pouches on. And then on Fort Bliss, I started taking work there, and Ricky and Roman wired the [inaudible] Club almost by themselves. And some of the light fixtures were about as tall as Roman, and he was taking them up with a ladder, and mounting them himself. But I would take them with me, and work them with me in the summers because I didn't want them to be alone at home or with a babysitter, or getting in trouble. I figured that I would teach them how to work, and how to run a business.

EV: I didn't ask you before, why did you decide to move back to El Paso?

RV: I really didn't wanna come back. I loved it up in Oregon. I like cold, wet weather. We lived in a rain forest up there, but my wife's brother passed away. He was killed in a motorcycle accident, and her family was going through some real bad times, and she just says, "We have to go back." And I look back now, I could have sent her back, to come back, to take care of them, as long as needed, but I guess it was a good move.

EV: And when you started your business, what were the economic conditions in the region?

RV: We were in a recession. This was the recession that they're talking about now. During this recession, it was recession of the eighties. Actually, the recession started because Vietnam was over in '75, and President Nixon was in office at the time. Jimmy Carter became president in the late '70s, and the economy was terrible. When I bought my first house in Oregon in 1979, interest rates were quite high. I don't remember what I was paying up there, but when I came back to El Paso, I assumed a note on a house, and the interest rate was, I think, 16 or 18 percent, and so the country was in real bad shape. And I started my own business in that. I thought nothing about it. I did have a savings because I've always saved, and also because of the bonuses I would receive in the navy, and because I also became a disabled veteran from some accidents I had in the navy. I saved some of the money, so I did have a savings when I came back, and I basically used that to start. It wasn't much. It didn't really require much. The most valuable asset I had was my knowledge, and then I had my two sons, and then I had my truck, and then I had my tools.

EV: Back then, when you started, what were the requirements to start your business?

RV: Back then, there were only city licenses. Now, it's a state license here in Texas, but back then, it was only a city license for the City of El Paso. There were no contractor's license. You did need a master's license to pull permits, but on Fort Bliss because it's a federal agency, Fort Bliss is an army base, you don't require licenses there. And so I didn't need to be licensed, I didn't need to pull permits to work on Fort Bliss. And as I started doing more work on Fort Bliss, as I started going out into the private industry, I was doing more troubleshooting that didn't require permits. And then shortly after, I went for my master's license. Actually, I went for my master's license when I was still in UTEP studying physics.

EV: Would you describe how did your company start growing?

RV: I was doing all the work by myself, and in the summer, I had my two sons with me, but then when they'd go back to school, I was doing any small jobs on my own. And I was marketing my business, and there's a place called Tennis West. It's a gated subdivision, residential subdivision here in El Paso, and I had been asked to do some work by one of the companies here, a lighting company, to do some work on light fixtures out there. So I went out there, and I find that the lighting system was in terrible shape. The board of that association, at Tennis West, called me in. I gave them a report. They asked me to give them an estimate, and that's when I hired my first person. I went to Popular Mattress to buy a mattress for my house. The boy that was putting in the mattress, in the van, noticed that the van said Villarreal and Sons Electric, asked me if I did electrical work. I said, "Yes." He said he was interested, that he was going to school at night trying to learn. So I hired him on this project, and his name was Oscar Pacias, and Oscar was with me for thirteen years, and he learned the trade there, and did very well. And that's how I started with that job, and then it was training him. I trained him for four years, and basically, he looked over my shoulder for four years. He learned to do things the way I wanted them done, by the code, very clean, very professional. And so Oscar learned how to do it that way, and then I hired a second man to come in to work under Oscar. And then we hired another man, and it took off from there. And one of the men that trained under Oscar, back then, is still working for me, Hector Lujan. He is now my service manager.

EV: And at any point, did you need extra funding? Did you ever apply for a loan?

RV: No, my wife and I have always been very conservative. We're not extravagant. Everything comes back to the business. About two years into running the business, I was getting too busy that I was answering the phone, I was taking care



of the books, I was doing the estimating, and I was doing the work. It was getting too much. She had been working for doctors, managing their offices, working for them. And she had just recently been working for an insurance underwriter. So it's been about twenty-three years now, I told her to come in and do what she was doing for them, to do it for us, because she was great, a very professional woman. And so she came in, and took over the office, took over the finances, the contracting, everything. She runs that entire end, so it gave me an opportunity to go in the field and train the men.

EV: In what year did she come and work?

RV: She started probably around 1986. I think that's it, yeah.

EV: And in any of your multiple training at different places, did you ever get any business training, management, administration?

RV: Yeah, in the navy, I was sent to leadership management school, which was an excellent school. I always was pretty good with people because of my mother and father because of the way they treated everybody like family. I had that success in the navy that I was very compassionate. I've always been very compassionate with people, so I was able to get men that nobody wanted. I would bring them in, and I would train them, and it would work out. And so that helped me quite a bit. Leadership management training in the navy, going to their schools, was a tremendous benefit for me because it let me know that what I was doing was right. I scored very highly in those management schools because of my traits, my leadership abilities, and my leadership traits. Up in Oregon, [it was] the same way. Just what happened at Griggs Restaurant, the same thing that happened there that I came in, and then all the busboys were fired. When I worked up in Oregon for Mid Coast, the recession had hit, and men were being laid off. In the very end, I was the newest employee there. I was the only Mexicano there, and in the end, I was the only employee left. And when I quit the company, I quit them

because they were not paying me the wages on what they call scale work. It was a job they were doing for the federal government, and on that federal work, there's a wage scale called Davis-Bacon. And it says that the electrician's wage will be an X amount of dollars plus so much in benefits and fringe benefits. And they weren't paying me that; they were paying me a lot less. And when I found out about it, I approached them in the office, and they said it was none of my business, so then I went to the Wage and Labor Board. They investigated, they got me my back pay, they got all the employees their back pay, and I quit. Even though I did that to that company, they called me back a few months later offering me whatever it is I wanted because this company also had a marine ways division where they would bring in ships from the coast guard and the navy, and they would do modifications or they would wire them. And I was the only one that knew how to work on naval ships plus I had the experience working in construction, in troubleshooting, and all. And so they told me whatever I wanted. At that time, this was in 1980 or so, they were offering me thirty dollars an hour, thirty-five dollars an hour, whatever I wanted. And I was young, and I was going to school, but I wish I would've taken them up on it just for the experience. Because I was very idealistic, and I told them I would not work for this man, Pat Rowley, because of what he had done. He had cheated me. And it wasn't the first time he had cheated me, but they had assured me that Pat Rowley was no longer in command there, [and] that basically the banks had taken over the business, and they wanted me, and I turned it down. So it was nice being offered that. It felt good being appreciated like that. But I know I probably could've done a lot better working for somebody else than working for myself. I mean, Linda and I have done quite well. We're not, like I say, we're not extravagant, and we pay our bills. Like one contractor, who was my mentor and a colleague here, Johnny Grijalva from Royal Electric, who was also in the navy in the Korean War, and had a business very similar to mine. He was much older than me. He took me under his wing, but he used to tell me that as long as you could pay your bills, you were doing okay, and that's the attitude I got. I never wanted to be a big contractor, big businessman; I wanted to be somebody that could run a

business. And really, I got into this business to train men. I told my wife that I wanted to train men, to create the best electricians in the country, and we have our own apprenticeship program in our company, our own in-house training program. All of our men have to train. Everyone that works for me whether it's a first-year apprentice, a fourth-year apprentice or journeyman, has to train in our program. We teach them how to be teachers because I have learned that just by my own training of other men that I learned a lot more while I was teaching somebody than when I was sitting behind a desk. And so I realized that if they're teaching, they're gonna learn a lot faster. So when a man leaves me, because usually they don't quit, I lay them off, I fire them really, nobody gets laid off, I fire them. But when they leave here, and go work for another company, automatically they become the top man in the company because of the knowledge they get here.

EV: And you fire them for that purpose, so that they can—(both laughing)

RV: No. I fire them because of, I guess, what I learned in the navy. There were a lot of rules and regulations, my company has a lot of policies, and they have to stick to the policies. And so I've had, in the past, very good men that went through the four-year apprenticeship training here, and became top-notch that I let go because they became prima donnas. They thought the policies didn't pertain to them, and if you let that go, that'll bring morale down in the other men. So I hated to let them go, but I let them go. And so we're constantly training men in this company.

EV: And going back to the start-up phase of your business, did you find any major obstacles to start and later to grow?

RV: The main obstacle that I have had in this business, because it's a troubleshooting business not construction, is finding qualified people. People that can't even— they can't even add or subtract correctly. In our business, we use fractions a lot in troubleshooting, and so I have to teach them fractions. I have to teach them

Algebra, and I have to teach them Trigonometry, those are very vital in what we do because we do a lot of design. Every job we do that's even construction-based that we do is all design work, all our service work, we design it ourselves. And so it's difficult because I get guys coming straight out of high school with high school diplomas, that can't read or write. They don't know how to conduct themselves, and then in today's environment, it's been this way for a long time, many of them have DWIs. They are all drivers, so I can't employ them, or if I do, they can't be drivers because of their DWIs. And most of them come in from broken homes; many of them are doing drugs. I told my wife that we should never have named the company Villarreal and Sons. I said because I seem to attract these boys that are looking for a father. They all become sons, *y los tengo que regañar*, you know, *y les doy sus coscorriones*, and we watch them grow up here. We hire them young, eighteen, nineteen years old, and we watch them grow up. We watch them get married, we watch them have their kids, and it's a wonderful experience, and it's enjoyable, and sometimes it's sad to see some of them go, but the company continues, and we offer them a pretty good program here unlike other companies. We have what I consider a very good pay structure here, plus we also give them health insurance benefits. We pay 100 percent in what's called a cadillac insurance company. It's expensive, but they pay fifteen dollar co-pays. If they go in the hospital, it only costs them a hundred dollars. It's an excellent program. We've had it for many, many years. In fact, it's no longer being offered by any insurance company. This is an old program. As long as we don't close it down, we can keep it, and it's expensive. We offer some of our key people, we give them a retirement. We give the entire company a Christmas party, which is quite extravagant with Santa Claus, and we found out from the parents what the kids want, so the kids send Santa Claus a letter. We get the letter. We pick a gift in that letter, and so at the Christmas party, Santa Claus, which is my son, Rick, he makes a great Santa Claus, gives them a present that they've asked for on their list, so it becomes really surprising to them. And then in the summer, we put out a camp out up at the Cloudcroft for the company. And when we started this, I think about eight years ago, I didn't realize that none of

these employees, maybe one of these boys working here, had ever gone camping. Because like I said, most of them are from broken families, don't have a father. One of the guys that started with me, his father was dead, and the day he started working for me, his mother died, and then a few years later, he found his father was alive. And he's been an excellent employee, he's got three children now, he came in as a skinny little kid working in a restaurant, doing very well in the restaurants, and recommended by one of our supply salesman. And Fonzi, is this young man's name, and so Fonzi has raised his kids at the camp outs. His kids know how to go camping too, so it's the programs that we put on for them.

EV: That's very nice. And in your opinion or what would you say that are the factors that have helped your business be successful, be able to grow, be able to go now into, not being only the electrical part, but encompassing a larger or more diverse business?

RV: I think what has helped us grow here in El Paso because El Paso's the hardest market in the United States. That song says, "New York, New York, if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere," they haven't been to El Paso. We have people from New York come to El Paso, and they go back to New York because it's easier over there. This is the hardest market, it really is. It's not fair competition at all, it's very cutthroat competition, but what has helped is we have never sold price. I have never done a job because I want to do it cheap. I always have sold value. I've always believed that if you sell quality, people will buy it. That's what people are looking for, quality, and they're willing to pay for it, and it doesn't cost them any more. It costs the same or less. Our rates are not really different than anybody else, but we get in, and we get the job done right the first time. Most of our customers are repeat business, word-of-mouth business. The majority of my customers come from out of El Paso. They're companies that manage businesses here in El Paso, and [they] have us do all the work. The Checkers Auto Parts, they were just bought out by the O'Reilly Company. Well, there's a company called RMS, who's one of our customers. We do the border

patrol buildings for them here, INS buildings for them here, all the maintenance, and troubleshooting there. Plus, they call us up, and said, We gotta schedule the remodels at all these O'Reillys. So right now, I'm borrowing men from other companies, who are slow, thank God, you know, I'm able to pull these men from them to do these jobs. But it's always been quality that's how we're known. There's a company out of Dallas, Design Electric, who is now called Facility Services Group, very large company. They have businesses all over Texas and New Mexico. The only place they haven't put businesses in El Paso. They use us, and they tell us we're their best contractor. They've often mentioned, too, that they couldn't do the business in El Paso the way we could. Of course, they say they can't speak the language, and they don't know the culture, which helps. But selling a quality product, and always pushing forth the very best. Our men are clean cut; they wear uniforms. It's all this navy training. Our first vans were grey. My very first van was a grey van just like a navy ship. Our first uniforms were grey, and then I changed the colors because grey's not good in El Paso, but everything has to look uniform. Everyone has to be clean cut. We teach them manners, how to be respectful, how to look at a person in the eye, how to be salespeople, besides being electricians. We call it super size; learn to super size the product. If a customer has a bad switch in their house, chances are many of their switches are just as old, they're gonna go. Try to sell, that while you're there, under the same hour of labor, sell them more switches. The only difference is the cost of the switch. Try to look for more avenues **that wants** you into a person's business, not only the electrical, but look at their carpet, look at their walls, do they need painting because we have other areas that we can get into that we have gotten into. We've gotten into carpentry. I've hired a carpenter, and we've built an office for a customer in his warehouse. So being total service, and offering the customer quality, and it really helps the way you present yourself. If you go in there, *un tajado* that's what you're gonna be expected to charge too, *tajado* rates, you know, do *tajado* work. But you go in there, and with a positive attitude, and that you wanna give the customer the best, and you don't cut corners, ever cut corners, and you always do it by the code. No matter what anybody says,

if someone tells you, do it otherwise, you just walk off, you don't do it that way. So you get a reputation about being quality, about doing it by the code. And see, one contractor said that was one of my problems here in El Paso that I had to do everything by the book. I said, "Well, is there any other way to do it?" And so I've also been known as being the highest-priced contractor in El Paso, which I'm not. And so my competition will send their customers to me to get another price knowing that my price is gonna be higher than theirs, sometimes it's not. But I'm not trying to take away their customers at all, there's plenty of work for everybody here. But selling quality first and foremost, and backing up the service, and being prompt, and in this area, especially, if you're gonna deal with the Anglos that are not local like those from New York. We had a little area here we call Little New York because there was so many from New Jersey and New York here, and many of them became our customers because it was word of mouth. And one thing they were impressed with is that I spoke English without a Mexican accent. And so I was raised here in the United States, you know? And that I was prompt. That if I told them I was gonna be at their house at eight o'clock, I was there five til eight. They say, The guy says he's gonna be here at eight, he's here at nine or ten [o'clock] or doesn't come at all. It's that. You get the reputation that you put out, and if you're late, if you do sloppy work that's the reputation that's gonna go around, and we have a very good reputation in this town. And not only here, but nationwide because I belong to an electrical forum group of electricians that are part of the Independent Electrical Contractors Association, which I've been a member of since 1984. This association is made of contractors, the forum group is made of contractors from all around the country, and we get together every six months, and we go to one of the member's shops, and we look into his business. We tear apart his business, his finances, his books, his employees, the way he does things, and then we critique it. Well, they came and they critiqued my business too. You learn a lot from them that way. So the other thing that's given me an advantage is being part of a professional organization, and not saying, "What am I gonna get out of it?" Because it costs you a lot of money, but you get out of it what you put into it. I was the executive

director of the IEC, the Independent Electrical Contractors Association in El Paso from 1998 to 2000. I built up the apprenticeship program, I built up the contractors program, so all the contractors, the majority of the electrical contractors know me, and know what I stand for. They know that I don't cut corners that I believe in quality, and I believe in the code, and so I get that respect, even though there were problems with the IEC when I was running it, *por los celos*. That's the other problem we have in this area, *mucha envidia entre los contratista*. But I never let that get to me, and they all knew, though, that what I stood for was quality. And that's what's helped me get ahead, and the diverse products you asked about. If I have a customer that tells me, "I need air-conditioning." Well, I know a very good air-conditioning contractor that does his own ductwork, so I will go in, and I will sell the entire package. And I will oversee it to make sure that the refrigeration, installation, the ductwork, and the clean up is done right. If somebody says they need carpentry work or sheetrock work or plumbing work, the hardest thing I have is with plumbers. I can't find a good plumber. But any other trades, I don't have a problem with. Luby's is one of our very good customers, and we've been servicing Luby's for twenty years, and they were bought off by the Pappas Brothers out of, I guess, San Antonio, Austin, or somewhere around there, very good people. They like quality work, and they hired us to do a remodel at one of the bathrooms, at the men's and women's bathrooms there on Mesa. That remodel alone was \$60,000 per bathroom. Some of the employees at Luby's say that one bathroom is worth more than their home, but they wanted quality, and that job was quality, and so they, themselves, know that. If they need remodel, if they want us to remodel an entire restaurant, I'll do it because I can find the people, but I'm very detailed-oriented. *Aquí discen que soy muy especial, muy dedicado (delicado??),y muy detallado*, so when people come to work for me, right off the bat, I tell them this is what you're gonna find: *soy especial, soy detallaloso y soy dedicado (delicado??)*. I want this job done, what's your price, and I don't argue their price, but I'm on top of it. And I catch mistakes, I catch details, I catch crooked lines, all of that, everything's got to be just so, and I've trained men. My *compadre* has been with



me twenty years. He came to me, he was a boxer, a soccer player, a drummer, and could work in digging ditches, and doing cement work. Now, he can do painting, carpentry, sheetrock, he does almost everything because I've trained him to do that. I mean, he's the guy that paints these offices for us, and so the other thing that has been an advantage is training. Everybody here in El Paso knows that we train here. Every electrician knows that if they come to work for us, they're gonna get real good training. And I've had contractors ask me if I could train their men because since I was in the Navy, I was big on training. And so that's the other thing, everybody knows our men are trained. So we are different. I don't wanna say that we're a cut above, and we're better than anybody. We are different. We have a different mindset, and we've been able to succeed very well with that mindset. And right now, there's an economic slowdown. They say we're in a deep recession. I think the nation is in a depression, and I think it's only gonna get worse. Today, we're still very busy. We're still borrowing men to keep our customers happy, and we'll just see how long that goes. When we started this company during the recession of the '80s, we were small, and we maintained it and we grew it. We grew in the recession, and so we've expanded ourselves. We are getting, now, into alternative energies, into not only solar electric, but solar water heating, thermal, as it's called. We're also looking to getting into wind power generation. Any type of energy producing product or opportunity is what we're getting into. We're partnering with this company out of Germany that builds solar systems, solar cells that produce not only electricity, but hot water. They're the only ones in the country that are doing that.

EV: Of all this that you have described about the training, and your focus on having everything right, to what extent did the education you got at UTEP influence you, did it at all?

RV: Oh, yes. Probably my most favorite professor was Dr. Harold Slusher. He was my physics professor. He became my mentor and my friend. In fact, the last class I took with him, I think was 1985, and last summer I took another class with

him. He's in his late seventies, and he's still teaching. I took an acoustics class that I've never taken with him. And his method of teaching is what I borrowed, exactly how he teaches because I learned tremendously from him. He teaches you the principle, and then derives. His teaching gives you the theory. From the theory, he derives all of the equations. He doesn't give you the equation; he derives it for you. He shows you, he builds the differential equation for you. He gives you the birth starting from several courses, builds up this differential equation, so you can understand the physics. Well, when I teach, I do the same thing with my men. I use a lot of his techniques, and I've told him about it. I appreciated him very much. [He is a] very, very wonderful man, taught me tremendously. That, and I had some other very good professors. My political science professor, Dr. Price was excellent, very professional. I had a history professor, [she] was a visiting professor from UCLA, I can't remember her name, very beautiful lady. It was an honors history class. She taught me a lot about history, and I've always enjoyed history. But in every subject I had, I had Dr. Strauss was a math professor I had there. My differential equations professor, I can't remember his name, he was Polish, I think. Also, I learned a lot. I learned a lot from their techniques. I would borrow from their techniques, and then there were some that didn't impress me at all in the Physics Department that I thought I couldn't learn from them, so I dropped their class to wait for Dr. Slusher. So I wound up taking all my physics with Dr. Slusher. So I learned his way, his method of teaching, so when I teach the electrical, I teach physics. I don't teach the standard way of teaching the electrical trade of what I call the cookbook approach because men don't learn. They learn the cookbook approach. They learn to memorize stuff. I teach them physics, so that they can see it in their mind, so that they know what voltage is doing, and what a current is, and what a resistance in the field does. And so they get all of this, and, you know, I use my hands a lot, and I drew these pictures, and I've gotten a lot of compliments from the electricians in El Paso telling me that they have seen some of the stuff for many years. In fact, a gentleman told me he'd been in the trade sixty-five years,

and I until I taught grounding, he'd really never understood it because I teach the physics of it, and so my passion is physics.

EV: And somebody like yourself that has had equal amount of training in the classroom and practical [training], what do you think UTEP, as an institution, could do to improve? Do you find any soft spots in their programs?

RV: Well, I think the application of stuff. I can look at the Electrical Engineering Department. When I was taking the EE classes, they were pretty much repetition. It was more of a review for me because I had a lot of this in the naval schools. And so as I was going through, it was good because it was a refresher, but I was also learning more. And I was meeting young guys that were EE majors, and I remember this young man, René Rubio, very smart young man, but he told me he was gonna drop. This was his freshman year. At the end of his freshman year, he was gonna drop, and change his major, and I asked him **why**. He says, he just couldn't get it. I said, "What don't you get?" He goes, "I don't understand what resistance and capacitance and inductance is. I can't get it." See, he had to see it. He had to be able to picture it. So what I did is, I took him with me, and I wired a little addition for a friend of mine, and I showed him what conductors were, wires. In the schools, if you don't have very good labs, you have chalkboard instruction, and a line represents a wire or a conductor. Some of the students never make that connection, but what I did one day is, I took a washing machine, a clothes washer, and I opened it up, and I showed him, "You see these little solenoids here are coils. They're inductors. And when they get energized, they produce a magnetic field, and that magnetic field pulls up on this iron plunger, and when that iron plunger opens up, it's closing the water valve, and the water goes in, and fills up your washer." I said, "And up here you have a timer, a timing mechanism that's a clock, and it's moving like a clock, and as it moves, it touches certain contacts, opens and closes certain contacts, and does different things. It'll open up the solenoids, lets in water, after they get up so high or after a certain amount, the timer moves, and shuts them off. It de-energizes the

inductors and closes them.” I said, “Now, you have a motor down there. It’s also an inductor.” I showed him how a motor worked. I said, “But on top of this motor, you have a capacitor. This is what the capacitor’s doing. On half the cycle, it’s absorbing energy. The other half cycle it’s shooting it back into the system to help that motor,” I said, “when it starts it up.” And so then, I said, “It’s gotta overcome what’s called inertia produce tremendous torque to get this motor to turn.” And so he was listening to terms like inertia, like torque, like capacitance, like inductance, and I was showing him, this is how it works, and then, you have resistance. I showed him what resistance in the system was, and so I said, “There’s your inductor, capacitor, and your resistor.” From there, about four years later, he graduated with an EE degree, and I saw him after he got married. He came back, and invited me to his wedding, and we talked, and he was working in California as an electrical engineer. I met a lot of young guys like that. One guy wanted to build his own disco because he had a disco in high school, but he wanted to build his own disco, and he wanted to know how to put together amplifiers, and all this stuff. So he became an electrical engineer, and I said, “After all these years of study, can you build your own disco?” He goes, “No.” I said, “As an electrical engineer, you don’t really know how to do anything, coming out of four years.” I said, “You should’ve been a technician. If you go to technical school, you get hands-on; you learn how to do it.” And I think that that’s where universities fail **is** they lose a lot of bright young people. I think there’s a lot of arrogance too. They like their high drop numbers. When I was going to UTEP, they had two hundred EE freshmen, and a 50 percent drop rate, and they were proud of that. But these were people that wanted to be EEs, and they discouraged them, and I think that if this was a church, to me that’s a sin. You don’t do that with people. Like René Rubio, he was gonna be discouraged. He was gonna get out. I don’t know what he would’ve become, but he became an EE, that’s what he wanted. And all I had to do was show him the inside of a washing machine. And I think it’s sad that their professors, not to be disrespectful or condescending or anything to them, they don’t have the experience. If you get people that are in the field that are experienced, that have seen it, know how it

works, know how to put it together, they can go in there, and they can make this stuff easy because it really is easy. Physics is simple. Electrical engineering is a piece of cake, and putting it together is a lot of fun. But when you go to school, and you get all these abstract theories, abstract ideas, and you've got professors that think they're sitting on the right hand of God, and they don't have to lower themselves to the student's level. I'm sorry, that's the problem we're having in this country. We're not producing what we used to produce at one time, and now, India, China and Japan, and the rest of the world is taking it.

EV: Very true. And going a little bit away from that, what role has your family played in the growth of your business?

RV: Well, it's a family business, Villarreal and Sons, and just started my immediate family, my two sons and my wife. We all grew this business. In fact, my son, Roman, when he started his business, he called it, what, Lumen Brite in electrical terms. And he had another one, which was Electric Light, another business he started, so everything in his life continues to be electrical, even though he's not in the electrical business. He's in the software business or training business. That and doing it for my family, first and foremost. I built this business for my sons, and I thought they would want it, but then I find that they didn't want it. I think, I wish I would've gone NASA.(both laughing) That's what I really wanted. But as far as my extended family, with my parents, like I said before, their an example of how they treated people, of how they committed themselves to the church that they were committed to projects, to put on projects, to fundraisers, whatever they did, and they saw it all the way through. That taught me a lot. Their energy, my mother is a very high-energy person, my father too. Both of them are extremely intelligent. My mother says I get my brains from her, and my father says she's wrong.(laughter)

EV: I didn't ask you before, what's your wife's full name?

RV: Herlinda Concepción Guevara Villarreal.

EV: Well, you mentioned how you met at high school, but did she have any further education or training?

RV: Yeah, she took some college classes, but mostly has worked for professionals. Linda's the type of person that really didn't need to go to college. She got such a tremendous high school education because she applied herself. I call her the English teacher. In high school, she mastered English, and her Spanish is impeccable. Her handwriting is beautiful. In fact, our first trucks, the logo on there, Villarreal and Sons, the script was her handwriting because I loved the way it looked, so **that's what it** was gonna look on our vans. And she, herself, is a very quick learner. She learned the accounting on her own. Everything's she's done with this business, she has learned on her own. She'll get in there, and she'll study, and she's a very hard worker. She'll work all around the clock to get it done, so she's always been very dedicated to the business.

EV: Would you describe more about her role in the business side?

RV: She handles the finances, she takes care of the books, [and] she does all the preparation of the paying of the taxes of any contracts that come in. She'll read the contract. She goes through the contracts, and then she presents it to me, basically, gives me a synopsis of the contract. She manages the office. Well, like I say, all the finances, which is quite detailed. There's a lot in running this business because we have a lot of insurances to pay. She's constantly looking at that, managing that. We've always been with John D. Williams and their company. She's always keeping them in check, making sure we're getting the best deals from them. She just makes sure that our credit is top notch. That's one thing that we have **excellent credit**. That is another advantage we have. We're a small company, but companies from around the country that have looked **into us because** Dun & Bradstreet, which is a business rating company, have always

thought we were a very large company because of our credit rating. We have very high credit numbers. We've always been able to go into any bank or credit union and walk out, if we need a loan, and we haven't needed much for the business. I think the only thing is we borrowed to buy a bucket truck; otherwise, we like to pay as we go. I don't like to be in debt, and so she's always been on top of that, making sure that the bills are paid on time. In fact, she's gotten complimented. One of our suppliers, Triangle Electric, their financial person (Rusha??), was her name, one day I walked into her office, and she had a paper, and she was showing all her employees. And says, "This is the way everyone's work should look." She was looking at the invoice and the letter my wife sent to pay off the invoice. She said, "I wish all our customers would do this." And so Linda's always been very professional, very good at letter writing, very articulate. And so she didn't have to go beat her brains in books like I did. For what she did, and she does an excellent job. This business could not run without her, although now she's wanting to retire.(both laughing)

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

RV: As an Hispanic, you know, it's funny because when I started the company, Villarreal and Sons Electric, the owner of a company called Garick Electric told me that my company would not make it because it was a Spanish surname. And I said, "Well, what's that got to do it with?" I had been gone from El Paso for about almost twelve years, and so I didn't think it was gonna be a problem. Well, he said because it was a Spanish surname, people would stay away from it. I think he thought maybe Anglos. Well, the majority of our business customers are Anglo, not Hispanic. Yet, this man, himself, is Mexicano. *Se llama* Gary Porras, he owns Garick. And he named his company, Garrick, for his two sons, Gary and Ricky, thinking the name would sound Anglo, and he would get business. Of course, he was raised in Mexico, so it's a different mindset. I was never shy of using my last name and he was, I guess. When I started my company, the first van, in the back, part of the logo, I put, "We buy, sell, hire American" just to see

what people would say. And we were over by Coronado High School one day, and a convertible car full of white kids passed by, and they're honking their horn, and they yell at us, and I was driving. He goes, "Sure you do, I bet you do!" something like that. And I kept thinking, What are they talking about? Ah, they read that, "We buy, sell, hire American." Well, a lot of people saw that, and a lot of people would just stare at it wondering what that meant. Part of my logo, under the Villarreal and Sons Electric, used to say, "An American Standard Electric Company." And a lot of people, my colleagues, especially, thought at the beginning that I was part of a larger company, a national company, maybe a franchise, and that I was locating myself in El Paso. And I said, "No." They said, Well, what does that mean? I said, "An American Standard Electric Company means that I run my business, and do my work based on the old American standards, a good worth ethic, quality. Like Zenith, quality goes within before the name goes on." I grew up with all of that stuff. Not only did my parents have an influence on me, my employers, my teachers, my family, also the television. What was being produced back in the '50s and '60s, it was wholesome TV. It was very idealistic TV, the idealistic family, the Ozzie and Harriett, My Three Sons, Father Knows Best; I grew up with a that, I Love Lucy. You grow up with that mindset. Even the crazy cartoons that they say are very violent now. You grow up with that stuff, and it colors your world, and I think it was a good color because I'm part of that generation, and I see others of my generation that grew up with the same stuff doing the same thing, succeeding at what they were doing. All of my sisters, my three sisters, are successful. All of my cousins are successful, and we're all of that same generation.

EV: You're after that standard.

RV: Uh-huh. And my uncle, my mother's brother, was a businessman in California. He had a water heater business. I learned a lot from him just by seeing how he conducted himself with people. And I think that's really the thing, I knew how to work, I knew how to work hard, I liked work. But how to conduct myself with



people, I think that's what is very important for children to learn. If they don't get it at home, they never get it. I got it at home from my parents, I got it from all my surroundings, but I was very aware of that. I would watch how people treat each other. My wife notices peoples' noses or the color of their socks. I notice their eyes and their mouths. I always look at eyes and mouths. I can tell a lot about a person by their eyes and by their mouth, since I was a kid. And I find out that I'm like my mother that way. She's the same way. Even the television was a big influence on me because it was good television. I grew up with Combat, it was a program based on World War II. It was war; it was killing. It wasn't violent, but you learned a lot about that. The navy, I learned camaraderie, which is one thing I found missing in the outside, in the civilian world, amongst the electricians, camaraderie. I found more jealousy. In the military, there's a lot of camaraderie, a lot of brotherhood that I wish you would find out here. Basically out here, you're a loner.

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

RV: Gone to NASA.(laughter) Not started it, and gone to NASA. What I would have done differently?

EV: If anything.

RV: I'm not sure, maybe left El Paso. A friend of mine out of Houston, who is the executive director of the Independent Electrical Contractors Association in Houston, he's a very powerful man, beautiful man, Bob Wilkinson, is his name, he was a service contractor in Houston, quite a large one. But when the oil industries, back then, I guess it must've been the recession of the '80s, went under, they owed him a couple of million dollars, and they put him out of business. So since the other contractors knew of him, and knew he was a quality man, they offered the position of executive director of that association to him. And he and I became very good friends, and I learned a lot about IEC and the association from

him. In fact, when I was running the association in El Paso, he wanted to retire and he wanted me to take over the association in Houston. When I said no, he wanted me to become his training director. When I said no, he wanted me to become the executive director of the state chapter for IEC. He wanted me to get more involved with IEC, and at that time I needed to get more involved in my business. But he told me that looking at my business that I would be better off moving to Austin because at that time, and even now, Austin was a small city, it was starting to grow. It was starting to become Silicon Valley East. And I look back now, and I wish I would've done that because, although we've done very well here, I think I could have expanded myself a lot faster, and had more opportunities, and different experiences in Austin than I have had here.

EV: In talking about the opportunities in El Paso, does your company belong to any of the chambers of commerce?

RV: I was a member of the Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce, and we're members of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, but we're not really active, so [we are] no longer members. I think they all do an excellent job, but what they were offering, I already had. They help, especially Hispanic Chamber, they help a lot of new businesses, startups and stuff. They're really great for that, but a lot of the stuff I didn't need. So I was looking for something else, and I found it in the Association of the Independent Electrical Contractors, in that national association. I gained a lot from them.

EV: And what do you think about the role of the Greater Chamber and the Hispanic Chamber, what do you think about their role in El Paso? What is your opinion of it?

RV: I think they do an excellent job. Richard Dayoub, who is the guy running the Greater Chamber, [he] used to be one of my customers when him and Bob Rogers owned Buck Rogers Travel, and that's where I met Richard Dayoub. He's a

wonderful man, a very loving man, and he's a very good thinker. I think they need to hit the streets a little harder, and get businesses in because, (laughing) I say, they haven't come to knock on my door anymore. And I don't know if I'd get involve again, I might. Now, the Rotary Club does a lot of great things in El Paso, and I've been invited by Dr. Dean Goff, who was my mother's employer when I was a kid. He became one of my customers years ago, and he invited me. He liked me; he liked my work and invited me to join the Rotary Club in El Paso, the downtown chapter. But when he explained to me that you have to put in a lot of time, I don't want to get involved or commit myself to any organization or any project, unless I can give it 100 percent. And right now with the things that we're doing, not only with the school, Alpha Tech and with GreenGo, with all the stuff we've got going on, I don't wanna dilute my time to other projects. They're very meaningful, and I wouldn't mind helping them with a Christmas program or with the kids, I love kids. I wouldn't mind helping with any of that, but not right now. Maybe later on when my son, Rick, now that the older son is back in the business, once he takes it over, and I'm able to step back, maybe then I'll get involved with them a little more because I do like these associations.

EV: In your opinion, what is El Paso lacking in order to create those opportunities to help businesses grow?

RV: El Paso lacks vision and visionaries. The problem with El Paso is that it's very cliquish, *así es la raza*. I was on the school board in Anthony for either nine or twelve years, I can't remember how long, my wife was on the school board in Anthony for, I think, it was six or nine years, and she was on the board of Region 19, the Education Service Center for six or nine years. And what we found was that we wanted to help kids, and improve the law(lot??) for children, but what we find is that the education system is more about helping themselves. Superintendents padding their pockets, administrators padding their pockets, it's about pensions and paychecks. It's not about children, it never has been, and it's a shame. And the proof is in the pudding, look at our education system, it's one

of the worst in the world, and we've lost our edge. We're not losing it, we have lost it. And I don't know if we're ever gonna be able to gain it, probably not in my lifetime, maybe not even in your lifetime, if things don't change. But the problem with El Paso is that the *raza* decides they're going to do something, and they only want a certain amount of people in. A lot of these people, too, if they don't get something out of it, they won't let it happen. El Paso stifles growth and opportunities by having too many requirements. Yeah, I believe in the permitting process to make sure that the stuff is being done by the code, but there's a lot of things that can be done to improve it, and a lot of people have told me that they won't put a business in El Paso, that have come to look at it. These are people that are asking us for help on their electrical end, and then in the end, they say, "No, we're not locating to El Paso because there's too many requirements, there's too many obstacles, and it's too cliquish." If you're not in their game, they don't want you in there, and I think that's wrong, and I'm glad that the FBI is here, and I'm hoping that all of these guys that got their hand in the cookie jar, I hope they get it cut off, and they get sent to prison. And I think that that's the problem with El Paso is that they're not looking at long-term vision at what could be great for El Paso. They're looking at what's in it for me, for my business, for my *compadre*, for my sister, for my brother that's the way they are, even our congressman is that way. I think it's all wrong, and I think the other thing about El Paso is that it's got—they're Democrats. I'm not putting down Democrats, and I'm not pro-Republican, but the Democrats have always been more welfare-oriented, *pobrecitos*. El Paso's got the *Pobrecito* Syndrome. *Ay pobrecito mijo*. There are no *Pobrecitos* in this world. Everybody is where they are because that's where they wanna be. God has given everybody the same opportunities. He's given them the body and the mind and they are souls, and they've got enough energy to do what everyone else did. I wasn't raised in a wealthy family. My family was poor. We had a roof over our head, and we had enough to eat, sometimes barely, as I found out, as we got older, but I never considered ourselves poor. But here in El Paso, everybody votes Democrat because it's the clique. Yet, the democrats haven't done anything. They have kept El Paso down.

I mean, look at the cities that are booming, their congressmen are Republicans. They bring in business. Myself, I'm a businessman. I provide opportunities for other men, some of my men have gone on, and succeeded in their own thing, and that's what I want. But I think that's the biggest problem in El Paso, they vote straight ticket Democrat. They have this mentality. They don't understand that to raise taxes doesn't help, to cut taxes helps. They don't understand how. To give business opportunities to everybody, to get people off of welfare. Some of these people don't want the people to get off of welfare because they're getting something for it. I mean, there's some old families here, *en paz descance*, Richard Telles(??) was one, *que era muy metido* with Project Bravo and organizations like that that my mother was a part of that. They had hired her, and she had to give part of her paycheck to him. He was a slumlord, and everybody knew it. That's what's wrong with El Paso. El Paso's got the most beautiful people. We're one of the safest cities in the country. Why? Because everybody is family, *el compadrisimo* is big here. Nobody understands what that really means. You and I knew each other because of my son's business. You were working for Roman, but I look at you, and I can look at you as a brother or as a younger son. It's that relationship, and that's what's good about El Paso. But what's wrong about El Paso is this *envidia*, *celos*, this cliquishness, and they're blind. There's no vision here, as to what this city could be. I mean, look at what (*la*??) O'Rourke tried to do with Fonseca and Marty Georges in the River Walk for El Paso, look at the Ascarate Swimming Hole that we wanna pay more for. Why? *Por que la envidia, los celos* and that you have these commissioners there, *venganza pa[ra] acá*. They're just putting in their own pocket. They don't care, and the people in El Paso, I don't understand them, and they keep voting for them. So I don't know if it's in the water like they say, there's too much lithium, or something, that people don't care, but it keeps El Paso from really becoming the jewel of America that it is. If you go up on Trans Mountain and you look over or on Scenic Drive, mostly Trans Mountain, you look to the east at night, and you see a clear night, all the lights, it looks like a champagne cup full of jewels. El Paso really is a hidden secret, and a lot of people that are moving here from other

parts of the country are saying this is a hidden secret. We have beautiful weather; we have beautiful people. The cost of living here is still affordable. It's safe. We don't have Disney Land or Shamu, but who cares? We have what counts; we have families. This is a good family environment, but we lose our best and brightest because we can't attract the right business because we don't have the right leaders. I'm sorry; John Cook, he's a good man, but he is not the powerhouse this city needs, and neither are any of those council members or neither are any of the commissioners. Look at how many of them are being investigated by FBI, that tells you that's the problem with El Paso. We have too much corruption, and they talk about corruption in Mexico; you don't have to go that far just look at here. We've got it here, and that's what keeps us down. And it's sad because we have the most beautiful children, I think, in the world, very sharp. What comes in their blood from their history, and from Mexico, from the Mexican/Indian history, what comes through the mathematics and sciences is tremendous, but we're not tapping it. Instead, the other Indians that are getting it are the Indians from Asia. They're tapping it. They're coming with their brilliance over here, and they're taking all the high-paying jobs.

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

RV: Get involved with older businesspeople, take them to lunch, befriend them, offer to do stuff because some people will not even talk to you unless, I guess, you offer to do something for them. Not me, if somebody comes to me, and asks me something, and I give them any advice, any secrets I've got, I don't care. In fact, I had a welder come to me the other day. His name is Rick Garcia, Rick Garcia's Custom Welding. I was hiring him to do some welding work in my house, some wrought iron. He started his business four years ago, but as we were talking, he told me, "Look, even if you don't hire me to do my work," and I'm leaning to hire him, I like the quality of his work. He told me, "I would sure like to be able to talk to you because I think you could teach me about business." I said, "Whatever you wanna know, I'll teach you. You wanna know how to run your books, you

wanna know how to—whatever. I'll teach you anything I can." Because the knowledge isn't mine. You can't take it with you, and it's given to you to pass it on. Because if you keep it, it festers in you, and maybe it becomes a cancer that kills you, I don't know. But I think that young people starting a business, not to get over their head, not to get in debt. To start a business that some area they're familiar with. Not to decide, "Well, you know what, I'm gonna start a restaurant business," and they don't even know how to boil water, to know how to cook, so that they can be the cook, if they have to. To know how to clean the table, if they have to, and to take some finance courses, not finance courses, but money management courses. Have somebody teach them how to balance a checkbook. You don't have to go to college to be a businessman. In fact, my physics professor, Dr. Slusher told me one day when I told him I was gonna take some business classes, and he said, "What for?" I said, "Well, I got my business started, and I want to." He goes, "You'll learn more out there running your business than you ever will in a university business class." And through the years, I found out that's probably true. You're gonna learn how to fill out forms, and you don't need to go to college for that. But to pick up a tax booklet, and prepare their own taxes for the first year, and to read everything in that tax preparation manual, not to take it to H&R Block, and not to get on one of these computer programs, to read it. And when you read it, you'll understand the tax system of this country. And understanding the tax system, then you'll understand how to run the taxes in your business, and never to cheat on them. If you're gonna charge the sales tax, you pay a sales tax. I know many companies that went under because they were cheating the state. They were keeping the sales tax, and when they got audited, the state said, "Oh, look at that boy." Slapped him on the hand, and audited them ever since, and they've paid penalties and fines, and all that stuff, and put them out of business. It made their life miserable, and they went out of business. And an old man told me a long time ago, never cheat on your taxes. They're not yours. You're collecting them from your customer. It's not part of what you're charging. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, that's what you do, and the same way with the federal. Make sure you

keep a good set of books. If you don't know how, save every single receipt in an envelope, and every month, reconcile, look at what you've got. Know what you can write off; know that you can write off almost everything. If you're running a business out of your house, you can write off most of your electric bill, your water bill, your gas bill, your taxes, your mortgage. You can charge a certain rent right to your business for so much square footage in your house. There's all these things. To get involved with associations, and not to ask what am I gonna get out of it. What's in it for me? Because you're never gonna get it. You go in with the attitude, what can I offer this association to make it a better association, and it's gonna come to you. It's the God's given truth, let me tell you. I spend a lot of money in the IEC going to conventions, going to the forums, but at the end of the year, I still have income tax to pay the federal government. That tells me I didn't spend enough money on associations, on write-offs, so what I do now is I try to keep it in the local economy. I go and buy new vans. I go and buy more gear from local companies. I don't want it to go to Washington, D.C., so they can send it to Afghanistan or bailout these crooked banks. No, I keep it in El Paso, and I try to max it all out, so that I pay very little income tax, but it's all on the books. I got a very good accountant, keeps us honest and straight. And when we were audited by the state, they couldn't find anything, and they sent this lady, and she even sent her husband, and they looked at everything, and even went beyond where they were allowed to go. (I came back and they said, Looks good??) They came back and "Looks good." The only thing we had to do is pay income tax for a carpenter we hired. We hired him as contract labor. He didn't pay the tax, so they were gonna go after him. We said, It's not very much; we'll pay it. He was a friend of mine. But to start a business, not to be discouraged, it's not easy. You're gonna work, you're gonna lose sleep, but when you start losing sleep, don't lie in bed until your hair turns white. Get out of bed immediately, go drink a cup of some herb tea, not a black tea with caffeine in it, but an herb tea *como manzanilla*, something that'll calm you down, and read a book. Read a book about business, read a book about faith, about philosophy, whatever. Don't dwell in bed because that's leads you—and to eat well. Stay away from alcohol, stay



away from cigarettes and cigars, [and] stay away from the Mr. T. Starter Kits. You see all these young contractors. They start up, and pretty soon, they got this big old gold hubcap on their chest hanging off their neck, what I call the Mr. T. Starter Kit because they start spending all their money on themselves, and right away, you see the guy with the dually pickup. They're taking all the monies coming in. They think, "Well, I made \$10,000. It's mine." No, you didn't make \$10,000. Like I told a young guy that was a student of mine in the apprenticeship program for the IEC when I taught there. He became a contractor. I told him one day, he says, "Oh, this year, I'm gonna be making about two million dollars." I said, "Never look at it that way. You're gonna owe two million dollars because you're not gonna make a dime until the end of the year when you look at what you've done." I said, "If you get a contract for half a million dollars, you owe half a million dollars because most of it's gonna go out in materials and labor, to look at it that way, not that it's yours because it's not. And to put it all back in your business because as long as you're feeding your business, your business is feeding you. As soon as you start feeding yourself from that money, your business is gonna starve, and pretty soon you're gonna starve. That if you're gonna be in business, it's not a personal thing, it's a business thing. That you put it in, and to always go reach for the stars, always set your standards very high. If you start in business with a low price, you're never gonna be able to raise it because everyone's gonna say, He's the cheap guy in town that's why I'm hiring him. A friend of mine that's a contractor came to me one day, [and asked] "Rick, what do you charge?" And I told him. He charges thirty dollars an hour less than I do. "Well, how can you be such a difference?" Well, yeah, but I gotta raise my rates. I said, "Yeah, the gasoline's gone through the roof, our materials have gone through the roof, and you're still charging the way we charged twenty years ago." And he says, "Well, I don't know what to do because if I raise my prices, my customers are gonna leave me." I said, "Well, your customers are hiring you because you're the cheapest guy in town. You don't need them. You tell them you sell value; start selling value, start raising your rates." Well, he did. He had to if he was gonna survive. When I started this business, how I set my rate, I

called up independent shops, and I called up the union contractors. They didn't know me, and I didn't know them, and I was very naïve, and that naïveness has helped me. I wanted to know their rates. So I said, "Look, my name is Rick Villarreal. I'm starting my electric company called Villarreal and Sons Electric. And the reason I'm calling you is because I'm trying to figure out what the rates are locally because I don't wanna undercut anybody. I don't wanna charge real low and undercut the market." And they all appreciated that, and even though I was a non-union guy, the union guys never forgot that, and one guy years later told me that he really appreciated that, that I wasn't here to cut. And that's why the unions have always respected us, too, because of our training, [and] our apprenticeship program. Our standards are even higher than theirs. They can't touch us, but to start out with that, start out with high standards. If you're the only person in your business, you're a one-man shop. Why do you wanna start cheap? You're gonna have more work than you can handle, and you're gonna lose customers, and you're not gonna make money. So you're a one-man shop, and you say, "Okay, I can only work eight hours a day. I'm going to start [at] \$70 an hour. I'm gonna start [at] \$100 an hour, and whoever hires me is gonna pay me that, but if I can keep myself working eight hours a day, I make \$800 a day." And not you wanna charge them \$25 an hour. I can work eight hours a day, and make \$200 a day, then you're never gonna get anywhere. And to remember that, as long as you don't duplicate yourself, you're working for wages. You have to clone yourself, that's capitalism, using somebody else's labor to make your profit. But that said, take care of your employees. Don't be greedy with them, don't lie to them, don't be stingy because they're your best asset. You do that, they're gonna leave you, and you've trained somebody. I've trained people, and I've let them go. I had fired them, and it has hurt, but I've got a real good core of people working for me, second to none. And to look at that, and to look at the long picture, to set goals, and say where do I wanna be a year from now. Okay, a year from now, I started out, I wanna make \$100,000 my first year. By next year, I wanna double it to \$200,000. By my third year, I wanna make half a million. Always to set the goal, and set the number, and everyday look at it, this is where I

wanna be, there is where I wanna be, but not to cut corners, to sell value. That's the hardest thing for people to get in their head, to sell value, not price because people in America want value. I don't care what you say about the poorest guy in town, he wants the best job done, and if you can sell him on quality, he'll pay you for it because, in the end, he'll know it didn't cost him any more than the cheapest guy in town. I called a guy one day, a friend of mine, who was a contractor, I said, "Hey, what do you charge per hour?" He says, "It depends." I go, "On what?" He goes, "On what you wanna pay." I said, "What do you mean?" He goes, "I have different rates. When a customer calls me, I say, 'Look,' they ask me what I charge, I go, 'Well, I've got a man I send out for \$50 an hour, another man I send out for thirty-five [dollars and hour], and another man I send out for twenty [dollars an hour]. And they say, 'Well, send me the \$20 an hour man.' 'All right.'" He says, "I make more money off of that guy because he doesn't know a damn thing. It's gonna take him all day to figure out the problem where I can charge the guy eight hours of twenty bucks an hour where my fifty dollar an hour guy could've gone, and fixed it in one hour or less." But it's the mentality of people. And I said, "Well, no, I don't wanna do that myself. These are our rates." And to be open and honest with the customers, to remember that the customer, no matter how ignorant they seem or how foolish or how angry they get, they're always right. And even if you have to lose on that job, you lose it. If you tell the customer, if they're angry, they're not happy with something; you try and make it good. Say, "Okay, what could I have done?" And never, ever to offer a solution first. In other words, if you charge the guy \$200, and [he says,] "That's too high and I'm not happy with this." [You say,] Okay, okay, what did we do wrong? "Well, I think your man took a little longer than he should have. I saw him standing outside smoking a cigarette or something." Okay, tell them, "What would you like me to do?" I used to say, "Okay, can I take off an hour?" "Sure." When I started asking them, "What would you like me to do?" "Well, could you take off like twenty bucks?" I think that's a lot less than an hour, sure. So now I ask them, "What would you like me to do? Where do I have to be here to make you happy?" I just took off of a \$3,000 bill the day, I took off a thousand

dollars for a customer. We didn't even make money. Why? This man gives us a lot of work. He wasn't happy with the technician I sent him, and this is the way things worked out. It was not a good day for him, but that's okay. I said, "Okay, where should I be?" [He said,] "Well," [and] I said, "How about a thousand dollars?" I said, "What did you bid that for?" He said, "Well, I had put in a little over two thousand bucks." His bill was thirty-two hundred. I said, "What if I take off a thousand?" "Okay, that sounds good." He goes, "Besides, I've got four more banks coming in." I know that I'll make it up in those four more banks. The most important thing that a person in business needs to know starting out, you don't work for money, never work for money because you'll never make enough, and eventually, you'll wind up in jail. All these crooks on city council and the commissioner's court, they're going to jail. Why? Because of money. All those guys in jail, are in prison for what? For money, the majority. You work for a standard. Either you set yourself at I'm going to be the best electrician—that's what you work for, and the gifts come. Or if you're a person of faith, you work for God. You do everything not for yourself, but you're doing it for God. That's as simple as it can get. Put it to yourself that way. I don't collect a paycheck. I don't know what my wife does with my money. She takes care of all that stuff. I don't worry about it. I've never worried about money. Yet, since I was a little kid, when I started my first business at [age] seven, I've always had money. I've never been without, and never to worry about money because this is a very magical place we live in, this world, it is extremely magical, and you have to get deeper into the magic of it by studying, by reading. There's a lot of philosophies out there you can read, a lot of it comes from the Far East, a lot from India that are wonderful. Even in the Western philosophies, in Christianity, Judaism, even Islam. There's a lot of tremendous things you can learn in that to run your life, and to run your business. And always know who you're dealing with. If you're dealing with Asians, always know their culture, learn the other cultures. Asians like a discount. I learned this the hard way. When the first time I did work for a Korean, he says, "Okay, is that the best price?" I go, "What do you mean best price, that is the price." He gave himself a discount. So the next time I dealt with

an Asian, I added 10 percent, so when he took his 10 percent, I came out even. I didn't feel bad, I didn't lose. And so you have to know that if you're dealing with certain people, they're used to getting a discount. [If they ask,] "Is this the best price?" [You can reply,] "I can give you 5 percent." [If they ask,] "How about 10[percent]?" [you reply,] "Oh, okay, you take 10 percent." They probably know you've got it padded in the bill anyway, but it's the way they do business in their countries, and we're getting more of that here. My favorite customer is the old-fashioned American that doesn't expect a discount that loves quality work and pays on time. The traditional old American is the best customer there is, really. You get Asians, they're harder to work with, some of them don't wanna pay you, and like I said, many of them just expect a discount. And if you're dealing with Middle Eastern cultures, they're different. If you're dealing with European cultures, they're different. So know your customer, know your market, and know where you wanna be five years from now, know where you wanna be ten years from now, and not to work for money. And put everything you've got into it, and you'll succeed. With that kind of formula, there's no way you can fail. I mean, I started in the recession, and in this bad time when most of my forum partners around the country are dead in the water, one of them from Montana, just emailed us, and said that he had thirteen men working for him. It's only him and one man right now, and they have no work, and that's the sentiment throughout the country, and right now, I'm having to borrow men to keep up with our work.

EV: And just to finish off, what hopes do you have for the future?

RV: Well, I know that this economic downturn and the changes in the world are gonna bring tremendous opportunity in new businesses, in different types of businesses. And that I have hope, I have a lot of hope in Barack Obama, even though he is a Democrat. He's more of a moderate and not a liberal. I don't like the things that he signed for the union. I don't care for that at all, maybe that'll change. I have a lot of hope in him, and I think that the rest of the entire world has, too. But I have hope in the young people because they're different, these young people, now.

They grew up with cell phones and with computers and all that stuff. Their world is different, and they're gonna get us out of this rut. We don't have to worry about it. And the men that work for me are tremendous, and I think that together with my son, they'll take over this company, and my wife and I will be able to go and put our energies someplace else. I wanna open up an orphanage.

EV: Well, unless you have anything to add, this will conclude the interview.

RV: Your tape's still going? (both laugh)

EV: Yeah.

RV: No, just that I wanna thank you for this opportunity, and I wanna thank UTEP. I think this is wonderful because it's like I said, I'm an American. I don't even consider myself, anymore, Mexican American. I grew up a Chicano in streets radical and Mexican American, and I didn't ever hear Mexican American until I went into the navy. I didn't know there was such an animal. We were all Americans. I think we cheat ourselves when we insist on being called Mexican American because we're Americans. If you're born and raised in America, the only place you can vote and work legally is here. Although my ancestors come from Mexico, my grandmother was from Ocampo, Chihuahua. One of my grandfathers was from Ciudad Juárez. I can't vote in Mexico, I can't live in Mexico legally, I can't work in Mexico, so this is my country. And I think that that's what people have to realize. There's nothing wrong with saying I am an American. I know my roots. I had no pride, I had no honor, I had none of that. I gave that up a long time ago. I gave that up with drinking and smoking cigars, and doing foolish things. Pride, that's one thing you also gotta get rid of in your business, don't have any pride. It doesn't get you anywhere. It hinders you. Be humble, I think is a very important thing, if you're gonna be in business. To be humble, truly humble because it'll show, it comes out of your pores, people will know. And doors open more to a humble man than to an arrogant man. An

aggressive, arrogant man, nobody wants around. A humble man, more opportunities and doors open. And here, like I was saying, if *la raza* continues to say, "We're Mexican Americans," the rest of America will say, fine, you can pull the weeds, you can clean the toilets, you can do the dirty work. Somehow, I feel that they think that you've given up some of your rights, and I think that some Chicanos think they've given up some of their rights. But no, you're American; you fight for the rights. Somebody denies it, do the American thing, smack them in the mouth—no.(laughing) I think that this recording of these Latino businesses or Hispanic businesses or whatever you wanna call it, I think it's wonderful because we have a lot of good businesspeople here. There's a lady called, her name is Suzie, she's got Ram Steel, it's a woman-owned business. She's a wonderful lady. I met her the other day, working day and night to keep that business going. *Haciendo se garras*, beautiful woman, and very good woman, and I look at that, and it makes me feel good. I have a lot of hope for our Chicano kids, you know, and for all kids really. But *veo algo* in the kids now, there's confidence in them that wasn't around when I was a kid. When you grow up, and the books you read tell you that Mexicans are stupid and lazy, you go okay, I'm not a Mexican. Everybody changes their names, and doesn't speak Spanish, and all that stuff, but no. And this country is a wonderful country, tremendous opportunities. Mexicans aren't here because they wanna leave Mexico. Mexico is a paradise; it's the most beautiful country, and the most beautiful people, friendly, loving. That's where this culture in El Paso comes from. The Mexicans change America, [they] make it a more loving country. They really do, and it's happening all over the place. But why Mexicans come here is because of the corruption in their country, and because there's opportunities here that aren't there. And I pray that someday, that Mexicans will be going back in droves back to Mexico to build their country because it is a beautiful place, it's got tremendous and beautiful history. Their history is as old as the history of India. They go back ten thousand years, the history of Mexico. They go back ten thousand years in the history of India. They're very similar, parallel, both conquered countries. I don't know if you noticed, we're getting a lot of Indians in

El Paso. They like it here, and I go to the Hindu Temple, and they're saying that they need to learn Spanish because it's a very valuable asset here. People from India coming here saying, *La gente de aquí no quiere aprender*. Edmundo, I wanna thank you for this opportunity.

EV: Thank you.

RV: And if I can be of service to you or help you with anything at any time, I'm here for you.

EV: Well, thank you very much.

**End of Interview**

DRAFT