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Mario Montes

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Mario Montes

Interviewer: Homero Galicia

Project: Hispanic Entrepreneurs Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: February 9, 2009

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Transcriber / Summary: Pamela Krch

In this interview, Mario Montes, founder of Urban Associates, recounts his early years growing up in El Paso as the grandchild of Mexican refugees, his experiences as a young man in the United States Army, his education at Texas Western College (now the University of Texas at El Paso), and his recipe for business success. Born in 1931, Montes, along with his six siblings, were raised by his grandmother while both parents worked. In spite of the cattle-ranching wealth his grandparents enjoyed while residing in their home state of Chihuahua, in 1910 the Mexican Revolution forced them to flee across the border, leaving everything behind. Montes recall how his parents consequently stressed the importance of both hard work and a college education as a means toward upward mobility. Upon college, from Cathedral High School, Montes enrolled in engineering classes at Texas Western, but the onset of the Korean War in 1950 interrupted his studies when he was drafted into the U.S. Army. After attending the Army's military police school, Montes served for two and one-half years as an M.P. He recounts that his military experience worked to instill self-confidence as well as to perfect his English. Upon his return to El Paso, Montes completed his education, graduating in 1956 with an engineering degree. His many years of working for R.E. McKee Contracting, initially as an estimator and fuel engineer and finally as a project manager, taught him the ins and outs of the business, aiding him and his two business partners when they founded Urban Associates in 1971. In 1990, Montes became sole proprietor of his firm after buying out his partners. Montes continue by sharing his personal business rules and his definition of success. Concluding the interview, he discusses the changes he has seen in El Paso throughout the years, as well as sharing his thoughts on the city's commercial opportunities.

Length of interview 70 minutes

Length of Transcript 33 pages

Name of Interviewee: Mario Montes
Date of Interview: February 9, 2009
Name of Interviewer: Homero Galicia

This is Monday, February 9th. This is Homero Galicia, and I'm beginning an interview with Mr. Mario Montes of Urban Associates. Thank you, Mr. Montes, for your time.

HG: I ask you if we can begin talking about your background, where you were born, where you grew up.

MM: If you want the complete story, I'll start by being born on Frutas Street. Do you know where Frutas Street is? A block off of Alameda, Frutas, right on the corner of Frutas and Luna. I went to Guardian Angel School.

HG: You had to cross Alameda?

MM: Which is in the neighborhood, but at the time it was a lot of refugees from the Mexican Revolution, very good people lived in that neighborhood. I could name a few, but very educated, very well trained [people] lived in the neighborhood. Actually, I was brought up by my grandmother because my mother and father both worked; my mother for the Popular Dry Goods Company and my father for Southern Pacific. I was one of six siblings and I'll tell you, we had to work.

HG: Your grandmother, was she Montes or—

MM: She's Montes.

HG: Okay, so it was your father's—

MM: If I may take a sidestep—you know, my grandfather in 1910 was *cacique* or mayor of a town, *Cuchillo Parado*. That is where the Revolution started.

HG: In Chihuahua?

MM: In Chihuahua, *Cuchillo Parado*.

HG: Did he play a role in that?

MM: It started there with some General Ortega, so-called general. Actually, this Ortega was a good friend of my grandfather's, but my grandfather was a pacifist. I mean, he was not interested in revolution. They called him, in the town, they called him "El Sabio", because the people in the town were uneducated, ignorant, and they would come to talk to him. He would give them answers and so forth. Anyway, this Ortega came to him to get him to join the revolution and he wouldn't, so they arrested him. They were going to shoot him the next morning except my grandmother paid someone off to come here.

HG: So he had to leave?

MM: Yeah, they had to leave. They were cattlemen. They were educated and they had cattle and they had businesses. They made *sotol* in that town Coyame, Chihuahua. Anyway, that was my grandmother's story, but soon after they came into the United States, my grandfather passed away. So my grandmother was left with my father and two sisters, and they had three ranches in Mexico. They stayed behind. She couldn't go back because she had no one to help her during the revolution. Anyway, my grandmother brought us up. Of course, my parents were working; six of us, and our house was the best in the neighborhood, homemade. My father, and we, kind of, built it.

HG: What year were you born?

MM: I was born in '31, 1931.

HG: You were born in the home or at the hospital?

MM: I think at the hospital.

HG: You started at Saint Ignatius School?

MM: Pardon?

HG: You started school, then, at—

MM: At Guardian Angel, and then from Guardian Angel I went to Cathedral High and finished Cathedral.

HG: And so you finished around '49, '50?

MM: I finished Cathedral in '49, and then I went to UTEP. And the Korean War started in '50. I used to dream of being a pilot, so I quit college and joined what I thought at the time, was the air force. I did go in the air force, but then the president sent out a memo they didn't want any more volunteers in the air force or navy. So I was left high and dry without a deferment and I was drafted.

HG: You wanted to join the air force?

MM: I quit college to join the air force, and I actually joined the air force, but then they stopped wanting enlistments in the navy and air force.

HG: How long was it before you got drafted?

MM: Oh, two weeks, right away. Right after I quit college to join the air force, the air force wouldn't take me because of this presidential decree.

HG: How much college had you done?

MM: I had done a year-and-a-half.

HG: Your siblings, you had, what?

MM: I had six siblings. I mean, we were six, and they all went to college, all my brothers and sisters.

HG: How many brothers and how many sisters?

MM: I had three brothers and two sisters.

HG: And what did they study? Were they older and—

MM: My oldest brother was a mining engineer, metallurgy.

HG: So he went to Texas College of Mines?

MM: He went to Texas College of Mines.

HG: Was he older?

MM: Pardon?

HG: He was older than you?

MM: He's the oldest brother. Then my sister, my oldest sister, Berta, she went to UTEP. And she was the head of Head Start when it first started, a program they have in the school systems, Head Start, on White Street, over there on Doniphan. She was the head of Head Start. She has her masters and she was a principal, off

and on. And then I have another sister. She is a deaf, mute teacher. I forget the name of the school, right here by Loretto, but she reads sign languages and—

HG: At Hillside?

MM: Yeah. No, not Hillside. Anyway, she was a deaf, mute teacher. They're all retired now. One brother passed away two years ago. He really didn't do much except he spent a lot of time in the army, then retired and went to work for Safeway. Then I have my youngest brother, Robert, he has a degree in music and he was a director for the EPISD music department. Maybe you know my brother, Robert.

HG: Yes.

MM: And that's it.

HG: And your father, what did your father do?

MM: My father was a warehouse manager for Southern Pacific. [He was a] manager towards the end of his life, but from the beginning he was a laborer. He spoke little English in the beginning. Later on, he could do well with English.

HG: And your mother, did she work?

MM: My mother worked for the Popular Dry Goods Company. She was the head cashier. She worked something like thirty-eight years with the Schwartz [family]. Very, very outstanding, my mother. I mean, you hear of the civil rights. When my oldest brother graduated from grade school, at that time the Hispanics had to go to Bowie High School and my mother said, "No, he's going to El Paso High." So they wouldn't let her, so she got Albert Armendariz, the attorney, and they

sued or negotiated with the EPISD to let my brother go to El Paso High. I don't remember.

HG: You don't remember the years?

MM: No.

HG: Because there was a big—

MM: No, but it would have to be in the early '40s.

HG: Okay, because later they brought suit against the district, but that was much later.

MM: Well, my mother was the first one, yeah, my mother. And she spoke perfect English. Of course, my mother's family has been in the United States before it was the United States.

HG: And what was her family name?

MM: Montoya, my mother's name was Montoya.

HG: So they grew up here when it was still Mexico?

MM: They grew up there and—

HG: In El Paso or in the valley?

MM: In El Paso, right here. I don't have too much story on my mother's side because I never met my grandmother on my mother's side or my grandfather on my mother's side.

HG: What values did they instill in you as a young man, your family, your parents?

MM: Well, we had to work. We had to work and we had to study. My mother was always, since we were children, we were going to college to be an engineer or something.

HG: You knew that right away?

MM: From the beginning [inaudible], and my father, the same thing, except with my father, he had more emphasis on learning how to work. I remember he used to tell me, "I don't care what work you do as long as you do it the best you can and it's honest work. You can clean toilets or whatever."

HG: And where did you work as a young man?

MM: As a young man, ooh, I shined shoes on Alameda Street and then I worked as a sacker for Furrs when they first came in El Paso. And then I worked in a hatchery where they hatched eggs to get chicks or chickens. I had many, many jobs like that. Let's see, what else? The service did me a lot of good, too, because I was drafted into the army, and something that I've always mentioned to everybody that when we were drafted, some of my friends and I, they were all Hispanics, two Blacks and maybe two Anglos, but they were all Hispanics and that bothered me. It bothered me all the way to now because you could see that there was something was wrong.

HG: That was in about '50, '51.

MM: That was in '50.

HG: Where did you do basic training?

MM: Basic training, I was assigned to be an MP, so I went to military police school in Camp Gordon, Georgia and because I had taken ROTC in college. Hey, I was good at whatever I do. I mean, (laughing) I don't want to tell you I'm bragging, but whatever I do, I do it right, and I do it good.

HG: In high school, were you an outstanding student also?

MM: I was not an A-straight student, no. I never studied, but my grades were Bs and Cs. Same in college. College was tough for me. You know what bothered me in college and in the army? I went to Guardian Angel, all Hispanics. The only English we spoke is when the teacher, the assistant talked to us. I went home and it was all Spanish. I went to high school, it was the same thing, all Spanish, except when the teacher spoke. So when I went in the service, I was really not fluent in English. I spoke English, but I mean I could not express myself the way one should. And then they asked me to go to OCS in the army and they sent me to leadership school where we had to give a lecture or a discussion or a speech in front of two, three hundred officers at lunchtime. Then they would record us and they would critique us if not. I was ashamed of my English. I was ashamed of my English. So with that, I proposed myself to improve, and I did. After college, I came to UTEP. I was very good at English because on my way to OCS, I was a cadre, what they call cadre in the army. And so I gave lectures to recruits all the time for a year-and-a-half, and then lectures on all kinds of subjects.

HG: You had mentioned when you first went into the army it was all Hispanics except for—and that concerned you a little bit. Why did that concern you? What was the issue?

MM: Well, what happened, I mean the community is not all Hispanic and I suspect the draft board, I bet you there was not a Hispanic on the draft board. I mean there were all Anglos and there were no Anglos, there were very few, very few. I

remember one by the name of Billingsly; he went in the army with me all the way through. He was killed in Korea.

HG: So when you went into this, you were going to be an MP and they took you out to go to OCS. Did you complete your MP training in Georgia?

MM: I completed the MP training and then at the end of the training they separated about twenty of us out of about three or four hundred. They all went to Korea, except these maybe twenty, eighteen, and actually I never got to go to OCS because the same thing happened to me when I tried to join the air force. They had too many officers and they wanted to reserve the officers for field commissions in Korea so they didn't send me to OCS, but I went through all the beginning, but they gave me a choice. They gave me a choice after that. After that happened, they gave me a choice to go to Panama, to go to Korea, or go to [unintelligible]. So I selected Panama and I went to Panama as a Spanish/English interpreter with the MP.

HG: And how long were you there?

MM: I was there a year-and-a-half.

HG: So your total service time was two years or—

MM: Actually it was two-and-a-half.

HG: And when you got out of the service—

MM: Well, when I got out of the service, I came back to college. I can tell you my English was a 100 percent better from my experience. But I learned something else in the service, because we had access, as an MP and in my position; I had access to all the records in the service. I'm not bragging, but I saw myself as

better than 90 percent of these other ignorant, a lot of ignorant people were drafted into the army, a lot of them. There were some very smart people too, but the majority, shoot I was better than—I could do anything better than they could, everything.

HG: So is that what you learned, that you could—

MM: Oh, I was as good, or better than any of them, any of these guys.

HG: So what did that give you? A sense of—

MM: Well, I think it gives you something very important, confidence. But I'll tell you another little something, my father used to tell us something that I've always remembered it. He used to say, "Wherever you stand, you own. While you're standing on it, you own that little piece of land. I mean, it may not be yours officially, but don't let anybody push you off of it, without cause," something like that, and it's true. It's true.

HG: So you learned that as a young man.

MM: My dad used to say, "Wherever you stand, that's your piece of land. You may not own the property, but while you're standing on it, they just can't come— You have some rights."

HG: So you come back from the service and go to school and you're different?

MM: Oh yeah, yeah. When I came from the service, I was different in the sense that I had more confidence. I spoke good English or I thought I spoke good English and Spanish because I had to practice my Spanish as an interpreter. And in fact, I can think of one girl in particular in college that thought I had been an officer in the

army, because she says, “You walk around like a snob.” (laughter) And of course, that’s not true, but I came back from the service with—

HG: Did you know what you wanted to study when you came back?

MM: Well, I was studying before I went. I was studying civil engineering and I came back and finished it.

HG: In what year did you finish at UTEP?

MM: I think I came back in '53 and I finished in '56.

HG: At Texas Western, was there a lot of other Hispanics at the university when you went?

MM: Oh, yeah. I had some very good friends. One in particular, he’s a physicist, retired now, Cesar Castillo. You know Cesar Castillo?

HG: I remember, um-hm.

MM: He went through the army with me, came back. And there’s another notable, Ruben Salazar. We used to go beer drinking to Juárez almost every night.

HG: You and Hector Bencomo, too?

MM: Hector Bencomo, yeah, not too much, but Hector Bencomo.

MM: I know he was a friend of Ruben Salazar.

HG: There were a couple of guys named Abe and Al Franco. We used to hang around.

HG: There was a group of you after the Korean War that went to UTEP. Has that increased the numbers of Hispanics at Texas Western then?

MM: Pardon?

HG: Did that increase the number of Hispanics at Texas Western, as you came out of the service?

MM: Oh yeah, yeah.

HG: And were most in engineering or did they go to other schools?

MM: No, Ruben Salazar was in literature or journalism. Cesar was a physicist and I had a Joe Gonzales who was, what do you call it, a geologist. No, they were all in different fields but, yeah notably you could see that UTEP changed.

HG: And was your experience good at UTEP? Did you have any outstanding experiences there?

MM: At UTEP?

HG: Um-hm, at Texas Western.

MM: No, no. Because I thought it was going to be an easy course, I took French as an elective, and that's where I met my wife, or my future wife. She was a professor's assistant. So that's notable. (laughter) We're still married after fifty-two years.

HG: Did you have an idea of a job when you first—

MM: Well, I'll make something significant for anybody listening to this because when I graduated, at the time, most of the engineers—I went to the El Paso Natural Gas Company with a friend of mine to apply and we both applied and we both took a test. He passed but I didn't, according to them. Of course, he was the son of the secretary to one of the big guy[s]. We went to the electric company. We couldn't—so I went to work for Northrop Aircraft, as an aeronautical structural engineer. And here's something else I noticed, the same thing as in the army. I worked with a group of about eighteen, twenty engineers on different airplanes. I was the only UTEP graduate or Texas Western College graduate. Most of them were from Purdue, Michigan, Illinois, UCLA and I noticed and I'll tell you I noticed that these people would come to talk to me about how to do a problem, how to finish a problem. I didn't go to them. They came to me. So I keep telling everybody I meet about UTEP. UTEP is an excellent engineering school, but it's really up to the individual. It's as good as any college in the country.

HG: Were you part of the group with Jaime Oaxaca, for example?

MM: Pardon?

HG: Were you part of the group with Jaime Oaxaca?

MM: No.

HG: Because he went on to become a vice-president of—(both talking at once).

MM: Jaime Oaxaca, yeah. I know Jaime very well. And Alba, there's a guy that finished college with me and we both went to work for Northrop. He stayed with Northrop and became one of the big— what was his name, Esteban Alba.

HG: How long did you work for Northrop?

MM: I didn't stay there long. I worked maybe a year-and-a-half.

HG: And that was designing airplanes?

MM: Working on different airplanes and missile, one particular missile, the Snark missile.

HG: Were you married before you went?

MM: No, that's the reason I quit. My future wife didn't want to go to California and I wasn't too happy with—I used to see every Friday at Northrop they would let go of two, three hundred engineers and then every Monday they would re-hire engineers. And I said, "Hey?" But that's because they would lose the funding for an airplane or a missile or a project and instead of relocating these engineers, they let them go. They had to re-apply if they wanted another job with Northrop. And I said, "Hey, that's not for me."

HG: When you were in college, did you know other Hispanic engineers that were already practicing in El Paso at the time?

MM: Hispanic engineers that were already practicing? No.

HG: So it was a new field for you?

MM: Well, of course, when I graduated, I didn't go into what you might call civil engineering. I went into structural or aeronautical engineering. My brother was a metallurgist working for the gas company. That's about the only one I knew.

HG: He did get hired by El Paso Natural Gas?

MM: Yeah, because I tell you, my brother, when it comes to metallurgy and chemistry, he was, even to this day, he's sharp. Oh, yeah. He worked for the gas company maybe twenty years, but the same thing happened to him. He never got promoted.

HG: So after Northrop you came back to El Paso?

MM: I came back to El Paso and found a job with Robert E. McKee in construction as an estimator or field engineer, and I did fine. I did fine. I got married. I came back, got married, and worked for Robert E. McKee. I worked for Robert E. McKee for like, fifteen years, starting as an estimator all the way to project manager for the El Paso division.

HG: You were in charge of construction projects in El Paso?

MM: Well, for all the El Paso division project managers. McKee had the Los Angeles division, the Santa Fe, Atlanta, and Dallas and El Paso, and I was with the El Paso division. Although I worked in all those divisions at one time or another, including Hawaii. I worked in Hawaii for six years.

HG: Really? Building (both talking at once)

MM: Well, the Honolulu Airport, I had something to do with.

HG: Okay, and Santa Fe, was that Los Alamos?

MM: In Santa Fe, no, Los Alamos was finished. In Santa Fe, we estimated the Air Force Academy, and I had something to do with that work, the Crystal Cathedral at the Air Force Academy. In Arizona, in Phoenix, I had a lot to do. I built a college. I built—there's a famous theatre there, the Greater Gammage Theatre, at Arizona State University. But yeah, I worked for McKee for fifteen years.

HG: And where did that come to? As a boss, what was McKee? Was that environment a good one for you?

MM: I thought it was. I thought my boss treated me very well.

HG: So why did you decide to leave?

MM: I decided to leave because I have a friend, Mr. Bill Castro, and he had a big company. He had a construction company. He was part owner of a construction company that went out of business and he wanted someone to replace it. So he talked me and a friend of mine, Humberto Sambrano, you know Humberto, into quitting McKee and starting a company. So if it weren't for him I would not have gone because, while he never gave us money. (a woman's voice comes on over the loud speaker) He never supported us. He gave me moral support.

HG: So you started a company on your own with his encouragement or did you start his company?

MM: No, we started a company with him. He was a 25 percent owner and Sam was a 25 percent owner and I was a 25 percent. Actually, I started the company because to save money, Sam continued working until the company was more or less established and we had money to pay.

HG: And how did you pay? Where did the money come from to start the business?

MM: Well, we started with \$25,000 a piece, which made it \$75,000.

HG: Was that your own money?

MM: Our own money, yeah. Yeah, I borrowed \$25,000.

HG: Borrowed from?

MM: From wherever, I forget where it came from.

HG: Family, friends?

MM: Yeah, I may have had it, too, in savings. I really don't remember where that \$25,000 [came from]. But Bill put up the \$25,000 and Sam and I put up \$25,000.

HG: And was there a fourth partner?

MM: A fourth partner?

HG: Or just the three of you?

MM: We had a fourth partner that came in later. A fellow by the name of Kenneth Mims, a very good engineer, very nice fellow. But he wanted to take his profits every year and we were trying to save the profits for bonding. So we bought him out. He was a partner maybe a couple years.

HG: So it ended up being the three of you?

MM: The three of us and we were very successful.

HG: What kinds of projects did you do?

MM: Well, the first one was, if I remember, was a Chamber of Commerce building in El Paso.

HG: Was that before the Civic Center?

MM: That was when the Civic Center was just finished. Incidentally, I was a project manager on the Civic Center for Robert E. McKee, but anyway, the first Urban job was the Chamber of Commerce building.

HG: And that was what company name then?

MM: Urban General Contractors.

HG: And then what kinds of projects did you take after that?

MM: Well, we did a lot of projects, of notable would be the community college campus, the Valle Verde campus. Which was really too big for us, but we took it on and we finished it and we made a little bit of money.

HG: How did you get that contract?

MM: Oh, we bid against McKee and Leavell and so forth.

HG: Big builders.

MM: That was a big job for us. I mean, right now it's a seventy-five million dollar job.

HG: How did you obtain that?

MM: Well, we bid on it.

HG: And you were the low bidder?

MM: We were the low bidder.

HG: Did you have the financing to do that project?

MM: Well, yeah, because we had Mr. Bill Castro behind us.

HG: And he had the resources to help you?

MM: You see, well, when you bid a job, you got to have a bond. We may have not had enough cash, but we had the bond with Bill.

HG: How large a project was that?

MM: I think, at the time, it was like fifteen million [dollars]. That's a big job, all concrete. One advantage that Sam and I had is we had experience. I hate to see some of these young people go into business without experience. The odds of their making it are, I won't say small, but not like what Sam and I had.

HG: When you started your business, your construction company, were there other Hispanics at the level that you were in, building a business?

MM: No, no. I would say we were the first ones in what you might call major construction. There were house builders, Hispanics. I think the Peinado brothers, I think they're no, they're not building apartments yet, but they weren't into engineering necessarily.

HG: And did you work with them?

MM: But there was a guy named Vela, that used to build houses.

HG: The Peinado's father, maybe.

MM: The Peinados were building houses, but the big construction projects, no, we were the first one.

HG: Did you run into any challenges with that?

MM: Yeah. In the beginning, some people wouldn't give us the drawings to bid on the job. I remember one comment that was made to me. I won't mention the name, but he says, "Ah, you just two big Mexicans trying to outbid in the industry."

HG: They wouldn't give you the drawings?

MM: They wouldn't give us, we couldn't get the drawings.

HG: Why? How did that happen?

MM: Well, the owner has a right to give drawings to whomever, but again my friend Bill Castro, got the drawings for us. Because Bill was all-powerful, you know, at one time. He still is.

HG: Why did you name your company Urban? Is there a reason for that?

MM: I think Sam's brother-in-law had a company, Urban Research, or something like that, a fellow by the name of Arenas, Claudio Arenas, out of San Francisco. That's really where the name came, Urban.

HG: Okay. In terms of growing your business, what other issues did you face?

MM: Of course, you always need more money to get bonded. You always, even right now, we have over a hundred million dollars worth of work, but jobs are coming, we don't have enough bonding, so most of this Fort Bliss work is going to outside

contractors. There's nobody in town who as [inaudible]. We have some, but we don't have enough cash in the bank and so that has always been a problem.

HG: How did you grow your bonding capacity?

MM: Pardon?

HG: How did you grow your bonding capacity?

MM: You can get, you might say for every million dollars in the bank, you can get twenty million dollars in bonding. That's kind of the line for getting bonded. So, if you have two million dollars, you can bid a forty million dollar. If you have five million, you can bid a hundred million, but it's very hard to accumulate cash because of the tax situation. There was one year I made a million dollars a year. I thought I was doing great, then the accountant comes, she says, "You gotta pay \$600,000 in taxes," federal taxes, franchise taxes. There's nothing left. Well, there is \$400,000, but you are trying to accumulate for bonding and it's hard.

HG: So you wouldn't put that in your pocket, you would put it into—

MM: Into the bank and the company.

HG: So, what year was it you started Urban?

MM: March 15, 1971.

HG: What big projects have you done in El Paso as Urban, besides the community college and after that?

MM: Well, we've done three community colleges: the Valle Verde campus, the Transmountain campus, and the downtown campus. And we've done Beaumont,

we did a big job for Beaumont, what they called the Pershing Section or the Pershing Branch, and we've done work in Albuquerque at Kirkland Air Force Base, three huge barracks, big barracks for the air force. And at Fort Bliss, of course, we're known. We've done more work at Fort Bliss than any local contractor. Eighteen barracks, we've done ammo dumps. We did the rocket plant, over there, on the east side.

HG: As you were growing your business, were you involved in a lot of the community activities or civic affairs?

MM: Not too much, not too much, but I belonged to the symphony board for like ten, twelve years, and I was on the Goodwill board for a couple of years. I was on the Child Crisis [Center] board for a couple years. Actually, with Texas Commerce [Bank], I was a board of directors for the Chamizal Bank. One year, I solicited for United Funds, but I didn't care for that.

HG: So your relationship with the banks, what was that like?

MM: My relationship with a bank was excellent, excellent. In fact, at one time we did the federal office building in Las Cruces. We had to borrow, I think like four or five million dollars, because that was a project where the contractor was going to own the building for thirty years. So, we went all over Chicago, San Francisco looking for cash, to lend us five million bucks. We had a hard time. We came to Mr. Young at the El Paso National Bank and no problem. But again, Mr. Bill Castro was [on the] Board of Directors of the El Paso National Bank. So Bill has really been very helpful, just the name.

HG: Was he a partner with you, at the time, when you went to Mr. Young?

MM: Oh, yeah.

HG: So you were able to obtain the funds?

MM: Bill was a partner until 1986. Because Bill has companies that develop properties and lands, and so forth, and we were getting involved with him in all sorts of things. And the bonding company says you are either a general contractor or a developer. You can't be both. So we separated from Bill.

HG: And he did developing and you stayed with construction?

MM: Yeah. At one time, Sam and I, we had signed, we were on the note for thirty-three million bucks because with Bill, we used to own Butterfield Trail, 7UP Bottling Company, [and] a couple of other companies, that I don't want to mention the names, with Bill Castro, and a company in Chihuahua, Mexico. Anyway, the bonding company says you get out of that or you get out of general. So we separated from Bill. And then, as you know, Sam and I separated in 1990. He went his way and I kept Urban.

HG: And he grew a strong company, too.

MM: Pardon?

HG: He grew a very strong company as well.

MM: Yes, he did and I don't want to mention what's happened recently, but I don't understand it.

HG: When you separated, did it affect your business negatively or were you able to continue to grow?

MM: No, it didn't affect me at all. I kept on going. It didn't affect me. I have a set of rules, that even today I give my son, business rules and personal rules for being in business.

HG: Can you give me an idea of what those might be?

MM: Well, one of them says, "Don't you ever think of doing something illegal." I mean that's number eleven. I know them by heart.

HG: Can you share them with me? You have them numbered. What's rule number one?

MM: Number one is: Remember that you are the president of a multi-million dollar company. You have to act like that wherever you go. The only place you can relax is at home, but otherwise you have to act like the president of a multi-million dollar company.

HG: Why?

MM: Well it's the impression you give, the confidence that you give the owners and whoever and the respect that you need to give. This is a tough business, general contracting is a tough business. And I'll give you uh, what do you call it, a little story: We have an engineer that was on a job. He's an engineer graduate of Texas Tech, and he was on the job as a field engineer and he came to complain to the project manager, a fellow by the name of Carl Marza, a wonderful engineer. Anyway, he came to complain that he wasn't getting any respect on the job. He was an engineer and he was being treated like a laborer. Carl told him, "Look at you. You look like a laborer, dirty boots, dirty pants." And the young engineer says, "Well, I'm working with concrete. I get dirty on the job. I have to be like this." Carl told him, "No. Every morning you got to come in like an engineer." At the end of the day you may have concrete on your boots and you may have

torn your pants or something, but you have to come in dressed as an engineer and you get respect.” And it’s the truth.

HG: What’s your rule number two?

MM: Rule number two[is a] very simple rule. As the owner of a company you have to be at the office at eight o’clock and you have to be the last one to quit, unless you have something going on. I mean, you may have a meeting, an emergency at home, or something like that, but normally you need to be at the office.

HG: So these rules are on the top of your head?

MM: Yeah, I kept them up there. One very important rule is that you have to treat everybody with respect: the owner, the people that work for you, even the laborers. You treat everybody with respect.

HG: Is that the way you raised your children, too, with those rules?

MM: Oh yeah, my children are doing very well.

HG: How many children do you have?

MM: I have four. One of them, of course, runs this company now, Michael. My oldest son is an engineer, a registered professional engineer in California, and he runs an engineering company. He’s in charge of the Southern California division or office. Their name is DenGem. They have like forty-three thousand people in the country.

HG: Very large company?

MM: Very large company, national company, engineering company. They design bridges, industrial plants.

HG: And he went to Texas Western, too, or—

MM: No, he went to Arizona State.

HG: And that's your oldest, and then your next child?

MM: My next, is my daughter works in San Francisco and she works for the California Institute of Fashion Design and Marketing. It's a school. They have three campuses: Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. And she works with the students in the finance area. My next daughter is Carol. That's her picture. She's married to Manny Carrizal, who owns Carrizal Painting Company. She's been doing very well. They're doing well.

HG: And your youngest?

MM: My youngest is here, Michael.

HG: Did he go to Texas Western, too?

MM: He went to all over. He went to Texas Western. He went to Texas A&M, and he went to some school in Houston. I forget the name. But he never graduated. I'm going to tell you, when it comes to computers, he's a genius. He's an absolute genius because he's been working with computers since he was five years old.

HG: So when did he start getting into the business?

MM: I officially retired in '98 and I got another partner, Oscar Venegas. I don't know whether you know him. I put Oscar as president, which was a mistake. And

Michael and they both owned the company. I think I had 10 percent, but the rest was owned by them, 50/50. But Oscar was the president and of course, after five years it didn't go well. So I bought him out, again, and Michael and I owned it until last year. He bought me out.

HG: Michael did?

MM: Yeah.

HG: So he's the president and—

MM: He's the president and he owns it all.

HG: What role do you play now with the business?

MM: I'm just a consultant. It's either sit here or sit at home. (laughter)

HG: But you're still the professional engineer on the job?

MM: They need me here for that reason and they come to consult with me very often.

HG: Let me ask you about business challenges that you've had over the years? You had mentioned a few things, but what are the big challenges you had to overcome? You mentioned bonding, what other kinds of challenges in growing a business, just the business issues?

MM: Bonding was one of the challenges. You know, in this business you get sued every time you turn around there's some attorney looking to make money or someone trying to get you. But I can't recall having any challenges.

HG: Where did you learn to run a business?

MM: Where did I learn? Well, I think it's just automatic, common sense and do the right thing. I haven't had any, other than being short of monies. What's irritating, you know, they have a program, 8(a). [Are] you familiar with the 8(a) program? SBA has it, where they take jobs to give to minority contractors. Well, we lost a few jobs because they took them from us to give it to minority contractors and I wrote a few letters. That was like taking money from one pocket, from Peter to pay Paul, or something, because we were minority as well. We were not in the 8(a) but they wouldn't give us a job because it was set aside for an 8(a) and that bothered me. We lost a few jobs because of that. It doesn't make sense because I know the 8(a) program, 90 percent of people that go through the 8(a), they go broke because they're not prepared to go into business.

HG: Well, how were you prepared? If they are not prepared to go into business, how were you prepared?

MM: I was prepared because I was with Robert E. McKee. I went from field engineer to estimating, the accounting. I knew the accounting; I knew the business from Robert E. McKee and Robert E. McKee ran a tight ship. They had some rules there that to this day I follow them. They're very good.

HG: Were there other Hispanics that worked for McKee that went out and started their own businesses?

MM: There were other Hispanics. I remember Frank, what was his name, Frank. I can't think of it. There was an engineer that worked for McKee that started, I can't think of his name. No, I don't know of any. Sam and I had experience building, actually building the building, big buildings all over, big buildings. Me, because I spent more time in the office than Sam did, I had the business from being at Robert E. McKee's office.

HG: So you had office experience with Robert E. McKee?

MM: Yeah.

HG: As you grew the business, you found that you were accepted in the community? You were welcome where you went all the time in terms of Chambers of Commerce and things like that?

MM: (laughs) well, basically as a building grew and we were successful, we could care less what the business community cared. But I have another little story about the Chamber of Commerce. I think I have mentioned it to you before. We went to join the Chamber of Commerce and, first of all, the guy that talked to us initially says, "I can't remember your name because you Mexicans all look alike." That was one statement he made. And then the other one was this, I've already mentioned it, he says, "You just two big Mexicans acting big. You have no business. You have no business." But once we had made it, we could care less what people [thought], which is [a] very important way to think, for anybody is you don't care what other people think. I mean, I don't care what the people know or think I'm a success or, I don't give a hoot. It doesn't make any difference to me.

HG: How would you define success?

MM: Just knowing that you can do it. You know, they tell stories of how he's lucky. No, no luck has very little to do. I agree that sometimes you are at the right place at the right time, but that doesn't usually happen. Success is more, and it's not hard work, either, because I never worked hard in the business. I always went home at five o'clock. There were exceptions, but I never worked hard. While I was in the office, I worked hard to finish the work. I mean, I can't say that I worked hard. But success is more in knowing that you can do it. And do it because there's a lot of people, there's talkers and there's doers. You want to be a

doer to be successful. There's a lot of smooth talkers, and they give you the impression that they're successful but they're not because they don't produce.

HG: In your growing the business, who else helped you? You mentioned Mr. Castro, and, of course, you trained with Mr. McKee, and of course, Mr. Young helped you at the bank. Who else might have helped you along the way?

MM: One of my rules, it says: Surround yourself with good men, with good people. I mean, I had some really good people that I hired because I can recognize a good person. I'm good at picking good people. I mentioned the name Carl Marsh, he was a project manager. I mean a hell of an engineer, the best engineer and [a] good man. I had a girl, Lavonne Whitston(??). She used to be a secretary at Robert E. McKee. I hired her and trained her as an estimator and she was good, hardworking lady. She passed away recently. Good people, honest people.

HG: Did you help people start businesses later as you grew?

MM: Well, something like Bill. Just two days ago there was a young man here that's starting an electrical business and frankly he has no business starting it. But I didn't discourage him; I just told him, "You better go to school. Go take a night course on accounting. Take a night course on estimating." I don't think they'd learn that much, but it's better than nothing because some of these young people, Hispanics especially, they have no business going in, they're not going to make it. They're not going to make it because they just don't have any principles for being there.

HG: So what takes your attention now? What are you involved in now?

MM: I do a lot of traveling. I haven't been able to play golf, but I used to play golf, a lot, and I still play, but it's very frustrating that I can't play well because I used to play very well. That's about all I do.

HG: If I was to ask you what is your biggest strength, what would you say?

MM: I think my mother and father really taught us what the right thing.

HG: Which was?

MM: Well, all these little stories that I tell you, my father telling me, “Wherever you stand, that’s yours.” That’s very important and then we worked all our lives and we had to study. We had to go to school and study. I remember chopping wood for our wood fire stove. I remember our house was the best in the neighborhood because we painted it annually, and the picket fence and we had a lawn, where the rest of the neighborhood didn’t. I mean, we picked cotton in the summertime sometimes. My mother had a friend that had a farm, we’d go pick cotton. But always with the idea that, of course, you’re going to go to school. And of course my mother believes, and father and they both believed in education. You see, which is what’s wrong now with some of these kids, the parents don’t care and the kids don’t get the right advice.

HG: Have you seen El Paso change over the years as you’ve been—

MM: With respect to what? Physically, it’s huge. Boy, Fort Bliss and east El Paso, you go twenty miles in that direction and they’re building houses. Yeah, in that respect, it has changed. They’re building a lot of schools. We’re doing three schools right now. But the downtown hasn’t changed. I think it’s gone down. There’s not much activity. Of course, El Paso, you have to recognize that it’s on a flat plain where other parts of the country are really going and blowing, El Paso stays the same. Where other parts of the country, are really down, not El Paso. El Paso stays the same. So, the opportunities for businesses in El Paso are limited in some fields. In construction for instance, right now it’s booming because of Fort Bliss, but normally, when’s the last time they built a big building in El Paso?

When's the last time they built a hospital or an office building? This happens once every twenty years.

HG: Do you have ideas for reasons for that?

MM: Reasons? Yeah. El Paso, they compare us to Tucson and Albuquerque, but El Paso is really not comparable to any of those. You can just see the—what's the income, the income is half what these other cities have. You might call the El Paso, in English, they're illiterate. Half of the people in El Paso, I bet, don't speak correct English or Spanish. Half of the people in El Paso, I bet don't earn more than ten dollars an hour. Half of the people in El Paso don't care whether their children go to school or not. Am I right?

HG: And politically, how do you see El Paso?

MM: Politically, oh, it's governed by the Democratic Party, which is a mistake. I'm Republican for one reason; I have had so many troubles all over the country with unions that are unreasonable. It's not what you pay them. I'm not against unions, per se, I'm against some of the rules that they have, and that's the reason the unions went down in the last ten, fifteen years because they have unreasonable rules. But I see El Paso, with a Democratic Party they're not going to get anywhere. Hey, compare it to Austin, which is Republican, Dallas, Republican. El Paso's not going to do anything. They may be a Democrat all the time, but they're not going to get the benefits that other parts of the country.

HG: Let me ask you, as we've shared, as you have shared your business growth, your family. Do you have some thoughts you would like to share as we get to a close.

MM: Some what?

HG: Some thoughts, you had some thoughts while we've been sharing, that you would like to share?

MM: Well, I think I talk too much. (laughter) No. I think if you want to go into business you need to prepare yourself. You need to prepare yourself. You don't necessarily have to go to college, no, but you need to know some of the principles of business, and moral principles, too, because some of those moral principles can get you into big trouble. But that's really it.

HG: Well, I certainly appreciate you giving us your attention and your story. It's a very important story and again I want to express my gratitude and as I come to an end of this interview, with Mr. Mario Montes, this ends this interview.

End of Interview

DRAFT