

2-21-2009

## Interview no. 1531

Roberto Torres

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utep.edu/interviews>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Interview with Roberto Torres by Manuel Sanmiguel, 2009, "Interview no. 1531," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute of Oral History at ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Combined Interviews by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact [lweber@utep.edu](mailto:lweber@utep.edu).



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

Interviewee: Roberto Torres

Interviewer: Manuel Sanmiguel

Project: Hispanic Entrepreneurs Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: February 21, 2009

Terms of Use: Unrestricted

Transcript No.: 1531

Transcriber / Summary: Pamela Krch

Roberto Torres, owner of the eponymous certified public accounting firm, here shares his experiences both as a successful professional and El Paso business owner. Born in El Paso in 1951 to Gustavo and Carolina Torres, young Roberto was strongly influenced by his father's entrepreneurial aspirations. After graduating from Jesuit High School, Torres attended the University of Texas at El Paso, earning an accounting degree in 1974. Gaining valuable experience, Torres spent many years working for large accounting firms. Throughout his early career he learned to understand the field's unique climate and perfected his both his accounting and interpersonal skills. In 1999, Torres struck out on his own, using only his personal savings to start up Roberto Torres and Company, P.C. From the beginning, his business enjoyed success. Torres credits this to his efforts to establish a strong reputation through solid work and a good client base. At this time, he has expanded his clientele to include international clients as well. Torres concludes the interview by offering advice to aspiring Hispanic professionals: remain optimistic, perfect language skills, and be persistent.

Length of interview 39 minutes

Length of Transcript 19 pages

Name of Interviewee: Roberto Torres  
Date of Interview: February 21, 2009  
Name of Interviewer: Manuel Sanmiguel

This is an interview with Robert Torres on February 21 in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Manuel Sanmiguel. This interview is part of the Paso Del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project.

MS: Mr. Torres, when and where were you born?

RT: I was born in El Paso, August 7, 1951.

MS: Did you grow up here?

RT: Yes, born and raised.

MS: Can you name your parents?

RT: My father's name is Gustavo Torres. My mother's name is Carolina Torres.

MS: And what did they do for a living?

RT: My father was sort of an entrepreneur. He started off when I was a young boy, he had a bar, and then later on he was a mechanic, and then most of my life he was a real estate agent. And my mother was a housewife.

MS: How long did he have the bar?

RT: Not very long, about two or three years.

MS: Why was it such a short time?

RT: It wasn't successful, I suppose.

MS: And that was during your childhood or later on?

RT: Very early childhood, like before I was five years old.

MS: And later he became a mechanic, is that correct?

RT: Yes, he was a mechanic for a while, as well. He was a mechanic in the World War II and so he knew how to repair things, but he ended up not liking the work. And so he became a real estate agent.

MS: And he became a real estate agent for a long time?

RT: Yeah, as best to my recollection, he was a real estate agent when I was about ten years old or so, and he worked at that until he retired.

MS: And let's talk a little bit about your education. Where did you go to school, high school, college?

RT: I went to a Catholic High School named Jesuit High School, and then after that, I went to UTEP and I got my degree there. It's a BBA in accounting, and I graduated in December of 1974.

MS: What language was spoken at home during your childhood?

RT: In my early childhood, it was Spanish, and then when it was time for me to go to school, my parents switched and began to speak English.

MS: Do you feel your father's experience being an entrepreneur helped you to become, yourself, an entrepreneur?

RT: Probably.

MS: How so?

RT: Well, I imagine it had a strong influence. At the dinner table and at the family gatherings, they were always talking about being in business and that sort of thing. It was never complaining about the boss because he was the boss. So it was probably a culture you grow up in where you think about things as being an owner and not an employee.

MS: Did you receive any education regarding entrepreneurship while at UTEP?

RT: That's a good question. Back then what we had was a course in senior year, where we had to do some, I guess some studies on setting up businesses. And so that was a senior year course where we broke up into groups and we did about three or four projects on different types of businesses, and whether they would be feasible, and what it would take to set them up and that sort of thing.

MS: Weighing them in, which of those you think has more value to you, to your entrepreneurship: your father's experience or what you learned at UTEP?

RT: I don't know that I would assign more value to one or the other. Obviously, it depends on the individual and how they feel about certain things. You add more to your knowledge and your base of experience, and so if you start with one thing, you just add to it. And so I don't know that I could say one was worth more than the other.

MS: Let's talk a little bit about your business. What is the present name of your company?

RT: My company's name is Roberto Torres and Company, and it's PC, which means Professional Corporation.

MS: Can you describe a little bit further your business? What's the number of employees? What's the service that you offer?

RT: The business is a CPA firm and so our primary service to our clients is provision of accounting services, which breaks down in everyday life to preparation of tax returns, preparation of financial statements, assisting them with making the day-to-day decisions that they might have to make. Sometimes it goes outside of accounting, I help them with legal questions. I help them with employment questions. Sometimes some finance questions, whether to buy something, or lease something, that sort of thing. I try to stay in my area of expertise, I have a lot of experience and so I'm able to guide my clients with respect to some of the things that might be HR related or finance related and that sort of thing. Oh, and the number of employees we have are six. There's three CPAs that work here, including myself, and then three accountants and our receptionist.

MS: How old were you when you decided to start this business?

RT: Well, I became a partner in an accounting firm when I was twenty-eight years old.

MS: What accounting firm? Was it here locally?

RT: Here, locally.

MS: Do you remember the name?

RT: Yeah, sure, it was Napier, Radcliffe, and Company, and that was in 1981, which makes me – let's see – twenty-nine years old.

MS: And how many years has this company been in existence?

RT: I began to work as a sole practitioner in 1999. So I've got ten years in existence, as a sole practitioner. Prior to that, I've been a partner in various accounting firms.

MS: All your life, your professional life, you've been dealing with accounting, is that correct?

RT: Yes, I've been in public accounting my entire professional life.

MS: Can you describe, a little bit, the path that you took right after college, some of the relevant jobs that you took?

RT: Well, when I graduated from college, I was working part-time for a CPA firm. And since I graduated in December, I went right to work in January fulltime for a CPA firm, which was tax season. And then after that, the two partners that were the owners decided that they didn't want to remain in partnership, and so I stayed with one of them. And ultimately, he didn't have enough business to keep me busy so he laid me off. So I sought out another CPA firm, which was the biggest one in town, and went to work for them.

MS: What was the name?

RT: It was Lipson, Cox, Colton, Starr and Company. And I really liked working in public accounting. I liked the environment and so I stayed in this sector of accounting for my whole career.

MS: How long did you work for Lipson, Cox?

RT: Lipson, Cox, I worked for them for five years.

MS: And then after that?

RT: Then after that, I went to work for Napier, Radcliffe, which we mentioned previously, and I worked for them for two years until I became a partner.

MS: And how long did you last as partner?

RT: I was with them as a partner for about seven years. And then I went into partnership with another person, and in two evolutions of the firm, I ultimately went solo. It was about ten years with Napier, Radcliffe, ten years with another partner, and then I became a solo practitioner.

MS: Why did you decide to go into business for yourself?

RT: I guess I never even thought about working for other people. I always wanted to work for myself.

MS: Who encouraged you or what encouraged you?

RT: I didn't get any encouragement from any specific individual, it was just the idea that I wanted to work for myself.

MS: Did you get that idea from your father?

RT: Nothing that he specifically said, just an idea that I've always had in my mind.

MS: Can you describe the economic conditions in the region when you started your business?

RT: The economic conditions in the region?

MS: Here in El Paso region?



RT: In the region. Let's talk about, I guess, 1999. The economic conditions were booming all over the world. El Paso has kind of lagged behind on the boom and the bust and so things were going well here. There was a lot of growth, a lot of opportunity, but I don't know that I took that into consideration when I started my business. It wasn't necessarily because of economic conditions. As an accountant, if you're a good accountant, you're always going to have work. And I'm certain I'm a good accountant, and so the question is just if you know enough people and have a good enough client base, then you can start working and go from there. And so the economic conditions never have been a factor in my decision to go into business or not; it was just I know what I do, and I do it well, and people will seek you out.

MS: So how did you determine the need for your services?

RT: Well having been in the industry for so long, I just always knew that there was a need for it. I know what needs to be done and I know how to do it. And so I've always had a following. The people that are my clients, most of them have been my clients for as many as twenty years. And so once you develop a good base and you do good work, then they recommend you to their friends. And most entrepreneurs socialize and have friends with other entrepreneurs and so once you establish a good reputation, it's not difficult.

MS: Did you have any technological issues to deal with at the beginning?

RT: No, not technological issues. No, I didn't have anything.

MS: Did you need funding to start?

RT: Yeah, we needed funding.

MS: How did you go about and get that funding?

RT: Well, I obtained funding through savings, through whatever savings we had, and then I just worked very hard. I didn't seek bank funding and just worked very hard, and I never have had a loan from a bank, never needed one.

MS: The capital it took to start this business, you said it was mainly yours or did you ask for loans with friends or family?

RT: No, it was all mine.

MS: Did you begin with a business plan?

RT: I had a business plan, but it wasn't written. Since I'd been in the business for so many years, I knew exactly what needed to be done. I think it would have been better to have it written, would have been better to be organized, or more organized, but it turned out that it worked out well just because I knew what needed to be done, in my mind. The problem with not having a written plan is – like my wife worked with me, and so she worked at my direction as opposed to having a plan that we both knew we were moving toward. This year, for the first time, I have a written plan, and I think it's much better having a written plan than having one that's in your mind that hasn't been explained.

MS: What major obstacles did you encounter during the startup phase of your company?

RT: The major obstacle is always finding somebody who understands the culture of an accounting firm. CPA firms have a different culture, have their own culture, and showing somebody who's not brand new what the culture of a CPA firm is a very difficult thing.

MS: Do you have a different culture as Robert Torres Accounting Firm, or is it more general?

RT: A CPA firm has its own culture and you have to work in one to understand it. My first years as an accountant, I worked for a large national firm and it was named Deloitte, Haskins, and Sells. And I mentioned the name to you of Cox, Colton, Stoner, Starr and Company; well, they merged with Deloitte, Haskins, and Sells. And we worked with them for about five years, and so I obtained the culture and I grew into the culture of the national firm. Subsequently, when I went to work for Napier, Radcliffe, and Company, both Mr. Napier and Mr. Radcliffe had worked at large national firms, as well, and so all three of us shared that same culture of how to work in a large firm and how to do things the way that the national firms do it. And so from that side of it, anybody who's ever worked in a large national firm would understand the culture that we have here in our firm.

MS: What factors helped your business grow and expand through the years?

RT: The factor that I think has helped us the most is an effort on doing good work. And by good work, I mean we need to be accurate, we need to understand the client's situation. And then worrying more about getting good work done than about where the dollar's going to come from. How that helps is whenever the client understands that you're working for them and you're working for their best interest, they're going to recommend their friends to you, wholeheartedly. And so we don't do any advertising. You never hear about my firm out in public. How we get our business, is from word-of-mouth from our own existing clients.

MS: Which years would you consider to be your best, financially?

RT: The latest ones; every year seems to get better and better just because I have probably more experience and a better base of clients, a bigger base of clients. So every year is just getting better and better.

MS: Can you describe major successes you have experienced as a business owner?

RT: The major successes are probably not noticeable to outside people, but they come from doing a good job, they come from being able to help a client get loans, being able to help a client accomplish a goal. And so my success is really coming from helping my clients achieve their success.

MS: Can you provide an example, specific example?

RT: Yes, there was a client who had obtained a major contract that was going to be, I think, about a fifteen million dollar contract, and at that point in time the most that they had ever done is about a million dollars in sales. And the fifteen million dollar was the contract that they had acquired and they needed financing from a bank. And the bank that they went to didn't have any confidence in them, so they delayed giving the client the ultimate decision that they had made of not financing. And so they got to within two or three months of when they had to begin the work and where they needed the financing to be able to provide the service until the first bill was paid, and they were going to need about, oh, between half a million and a million dollars to be able to provide the up front work. And through my contacts, I was able to put them in contact with a different bank. I was able to prepare financial statements for them, and then I was able to guide the client and the banker through the process of giving the banker the confidence that these people actually could do the work that they had contracted to do, at the same time showing the contractor exactly what needed to be done to be able to complete the work. And so ultimately they were able to get the financing, complete the work and they were quite profitable as a result. That's an example of a success.

MS: And what have been your disappointments?

RT: Disappointments in what, specifically?

MS: As a business owner.

RT: Disappointments probably have been personal in the sense that on some occasions, I haven't been able to motivate some of the staff people to understand the kind of effort that's necessary to do good work, and as a result, we weren't able to work together. They went off and did whatever they do, presently.

MS: What do you think has contributed to your success?

RT: Optimism.

MS: Can you elaborate on that?

RT: Yeah. Basically, I think most entrepreneurs are very optimistic people, and as a result, even though you might have a set back here and there, you ultimately are optimistic and so you keep persisting toward trying to achieve your goal. And some people call it persistence. I say it's optimism. You just see the good in what you need to accomplish and you kind of block out or ignore whatever the obstacles are and you keep going until you're successful.

MS: Both your successes and your disappointments have to do with people skills, if you can say that. What role would you say that people skills play in the success of your company?

RT: People skills are hugely important, and the better you are at developing them early on and the better you are at recognizing how important a trait that is, probably the better and more successful you'll be, and the more quickly you'll probably achieve success.

MS: What role has your family played in the growth of your business?

RT: If you're talking about your immediate family, like your wife and your children, that's huge because they have to understand that there's a lot of sacrifices that are made in terms of time and your attention is a lot of times on your business and not necessarily on the family. They play a huge role in your success in terms of allowing you to devote the time in order to achieve that success. The outside family, at least in my case, hasn't had much of a role, although, they've all been supportive and many of them come to me for advice and I prepare their tax returns, but that didn't happen until much, much later in my career. But more than anything else, everybody has been supportive of our efforts and that sort of thing. But we never did ask them for money. We never asked them for favors. And so from that side of it, we didn't need their support to achieve our success. It's just the immediate family that does make the sacrifices.

MS: Have you transitioned your business to include other family members?

RT: No.

MS: What challenges have you faced growing a business as a Hispanic?

RT: In El Paso, I don't think there are that many challenges, at least I've never felt like there was any biases against me. And actually, I didn't feel like there were any biases in my favor either. And it's just a matter of doing work, being able to develop the relationship with people, being able to inspire confidence in people to have them allow you to provide services to them. And that question may be answered differently outside of the area of El Paso where there aren't many Hispanics. But a lot of my initial clients were not Hispanic. Hence my answer in terms of did I have any challenges and that sort of thing, not that many. A lot of people say that there's challenges being Hispanic whenever they're trying to obtain loans, I've never seen it. And I know banks have to be conservative and as

a result, a lot of times they deny loans to people who are just starting out and I always was able to see the, usually the lack of capital people had. And so it never was a thing where I thought people were being denied a loan because they were Hispanic. It was always relatively clear to me that it was probably because of a lack of capital, perhaps a lack of experience, and not necessarily a lack of, or because they were Hispanic.

MS: What percentage of your customer base is Hispanic?

RT: A majority; it probably reflects the population of El Paso.

MS: You mentioned that your client base is key in your business. Does it come to an advantage or disadvantage that the majority of your customer base is Hispanic?

RT: Actually, it doesn't make any difference. I think in El Paso people are comfortable dealing with Hispanics as they are dealing with non-Hispanics, and so I don't think it makes any difference.

MS: Have you experienced discrimination as a business owner?

RT: That I'm aware of, no.

MS: On a scale of one to ten, how do you rank your acceptance into the local business community?

RT: Ten would be the highest? I would think in terms of the efforts I've made, it's a ten. People will be accepted in the community if they go out and make an effort to be accepted, and so your acceptance depends upon how hard you work at being accepted. I've never been denied anything I wanted. I've never wanted anything that I went out to get that I didn't get. So I'd say it was a ten.

MS: Have you expanded your market beyond the local area?

RT: Yes.

MS: Where and when?

RT: Well, basically, I've stayed in the local area, but people have managed to seek me out or remain with me. Had clients that were here and then left to go live somewhere else and I still prepare their tax returns. I've prepared tax returns for companies in Mexico, and then occasionally I've gotten referrals from clients that do work for people, for example in Chile. I've done work for people that are in Germany, done work for people that are in Italy, Japan. And so I've done work for people in, you could say all over the world, not a lot, but I've done accounting work and it's all based upon word of mouth, one person tells another person.

MS: What type of work do you do for those international customers?

RT: A lot of times, they will have investments in the United States, and they will make a sale or they will get some income, and they have to prepare a U.S. tax return. So I'll prepare their U.S. tax return.

MS: Based on their 1099s?

RT: Yeah, partially on that or whatever the source document is, but the idea is that doing international work is a unique niche and not every accountant knows how to do that. And fortunately, I do, so I can get those referrals, and I can do that work.

MS: Is it complicated?



RT: Not complicated, it just takes knowing a couple of extra things that the average payer doesn't know.

MS: Like what?

RT: International law and how the United States treats international law. Most people just learn how to do stuff in the United States, but because of our proximity to the border, I learned it because of dealing with people in Mexico that invest in United States. I can deal with those laws with respect to anywhere in the world.

MS: Mr. Torres, how did you acquire that experience in international law?

RT: Well, like I said, because of our proximity. I had occasion to acquire some clients from Chihuahua, initially, and so I had to learn how to prepare their U.S. tax returns for Mexican citizens. And having learned that, then the rest of the law is relatively similar and so you just need to know how to pursue those particular things, like any tax treatise with the specific countries that people reside in, and so from that side of things. So that opens up a niche that you can just go into.

MS: What percentage of your customer base do you do international accounting for?

RT: Well, I do U.S. tax returns. I don't necessarily do international accounting, but to prepare an American tax return, you have to know about how that's treated internationally. Probably, maybe, it's a small percentage, say less than ten, somewhere between ten and five.

MS: Have you been spotlighted as a Hispanic business leader?

RT: No.

MS: Are you a member of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce?

RT: No.

MS: The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce?

RT: No, although I have been in the past. Presently, I don't think I am.

MS: What was the relationship when you were part of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce?

RT: I was an inactive member. I just sent them money to support them.

MS: And that's the reason why you stopped being a member?

RT: Yeah. Although, I do think they're doing an excellent job right now. When I was a member I didn't think they were doing a very good job.

MS: When were you a member?

RT: Oh, probably ten years ago.

MS: And for how long?

RT: For about maybe five or six years before then.

MS: Let's go back a little bit when you started up your business. How big of a capital investment did you have to make to open up your business?

RT: About, oh, \$15,000.

MS: Did you have trouble with legal fees or special permits, licenses?

RT: No, no. I was aware of everything that needed to be done, and by that time, I had clients who were attorneys, and so I was able to go to them to get whatever needed to be done. They didn't necessarily give me any discounts; it was just a matter of knowing exactly what needed to be done in order to be able to get into my own business.

MS: After you received your degree from UTEP, did you take any other courses to become more specialized?

RT: Yes, I did. The firm that I was with— I decided I wanted to have an emphasis in taxation and so I was able to go to, for many years, I was able to go to summer courses that specialized in income taxes. And these were put on by one of the large national accounting firms. And so I continued my education in income taxation for a number of years.

MS: Looking back on your business, what would you have done differently, if anything?

RT: In terms of done differently, basically, I would have probably had more emphasis on the people skills and the planning skills as well as the technical skills.

MS: Why?

RT: Well, it's what we've gone back to before, your team is as important as you are and you need to be able to know how to motivate them to achieve the level of knowledge and performance that one individually wants to achieve.

MS: What dreams do you have for the future?

RT: My dreams are the same as they have been. I want to do excellent work, and I want to be recognized by the community in which I work in as doing excellent work.

MS: You mentioned that you recently have a written business plan. How has this business plan shaped or make different your business?

RT: It hasn't made it different. What it's done is focus the attention on achieving the goal. And my hope is that we're going to achieve the goal sooner. For example, I've indicated how much I want to be able to make, as a profit, this year and so if my wife and I, and she's our office manager, if we know exactly how much we need to accomplish and when, then our attention is focused on that and it's not distracted by other outside influences.

MS: What sort of goals are written in your business plan?

RT: Initially, there's a profit goal. As sidelines, there's goals in terms of the efficiency of the firm, and aside from that then there's some personal goals that my wife and I want to accomplish and they're in there as well. And so those are the types of goals we've got.

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

RT: I would want them to understand their trade very well. I would want them to be very good at use of the language, both written and spoken. Probably if we're talking Hispanics, if they want to do any work with any native Spanish speakers, like people from Mexico or further south, then they should be very good at being able to express themselves in Spanish, but primarily, if they're going to work in the United States, they also need to speak the English language well and write it very well.

MS: Do you feel the business climate today is better, or worse, for Hispanic business owners than when you started your company?

RT: Probably better.

MS: Why?

RT: Because there are more Hispanics that the American public is aware of than there were before, and so as a result probably there's a greater level of acceptance. But I go back to the part that in El Paso it probably didn't make any difference by the time that I started my business, but perhaps on a national basis, it's probably better.

MS: Mr. Torres, is there something you would like to say that we have not covered in the questionnaire?

RT: No, I think we've covered it very well. I think if you just take the Hispanic experience in El Paso, I don't know that you can apply that to the Hispanic experience throughout the country just because there are so many Hispanics here. I don't know that we run into the same obstacles here as what other people outside of El Paso run into. And so that's the only thing I would urge you to take into consideration. It's probably easier here than it probably is elsewhere.

MS: Mr. Torres, thank you so much for your time.

RT: Thank you.

**End of Interview**