

**Oral History Interview of
Noé Lara**

**Interviewed by: Daniel Sanchez
November 14, 2009
Lubbock, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Hispanic Interview Series***

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Interview Series Background:

The Hispanic Oral History Project documents the diverse perspectives of the Hispanic people of Lubbock and the South Plains. These interviews and accompanying manuscript materials cover a myriad of topics including; early Lubbock, discrimination, politics, education, music, art, cultural celebrations, the May 11th 1970 tornado, commerce, and sport.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Noé Lara as he discusses growing up and being the first in his family to attend college. Lara also describes being a Chicano activist.

Length of Interview: 01:02:21

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Keywords

Family life and background, Chicano, Activism

Daniel Sanchez (DS):

My name is Daniel Sanchez. Today's date is November 14, 2009. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, at the Southwest Collection, and I'm interviewing Noé Lara, as part of our Hispanic heritage and Texas Tech University history. Noé was part of the group known as Los Tertulianos: Texas Tech's first minority organization. Noé, let's start off by asking you your complete legal name.

Noé Lara (NL):

My name is Noé Lara.

DS:

Okay. And when and where you born?

NL:

That's kind of an interesting story. Well, I was born in Kenedy Ranch in Williamson County, Texas. It was about twenty miles from Austin. Now, when I was born—that's kind of a different story. I always thought I was born July 3, 1945, and then when my wife and I were going to go to Europe, and I had to get a passport, so I sent off for a—I live in New Mexico now—I sent off for the birth certificate from the archives in Austin, and I found out in it, it said September 3, 1944. So it's kind of debatable when I was really born, but somewhere between 1944 and 1945, either July or September.

DS:

Wow, that's a slight gap there. [Laughter] Did—was there anybody around that you could ask?

NL:

Well, I have several brothers and sisters that are older, and it's kind of—nobody really remembers, so I guess I wasn't a very memorable person in my family. I was third in a family of thirteen.

DS:

Wow.

NL:

Thirteenth youngest.

DS:

Well, let's talk a little bit about your parents. Start with your father and then your mother. State their names and where and when they were born.

NL:

My father was born in 1899. His name is David Lara, and he is directly from—came from Mexico. And my mother, her name was Aurora Lara, and I understand that she was born in Bigfoot, Texas. I didn't really know this until I was older. I always thought they both came from Mexico, but apparently she was born there. She had to prove that she was born in the United States, so at that time, they were allowing the—if you had two witnesses that—or knew that you were born, you can get birth certificate, and I think she did that when she was in her fifties. My uncle and somebody else said she was born out there, but they were no records of her being born in the United States, but she was born in Bigfoot, Texas.

DS:

Okay. So what was it that in the fifties she needed to prove her residency?

NL:

She just wanted—she was always afraid to go into Mexico to visit or anything because she was afraid that they were going to keep her there for being—coming back illegal, so she just wanted to prove that she was an American citizen, and it would meant [sic] a lot to her, so that whole process went on, and it happened, and that was great.

DS:

And what year was she born?

NL:

Gosh, I don't know. She was maybe about six years younger than my father, so I suspect maybe, I don't know, 1908 or '10, or something like that.

DS:

Okay. Did either of your parents talk about their grandparents? Or did you know your grandparents?

NL:

You know, when I was born, apparently, my grandmother on my mother side had been living with the family there, but I don't remember her at all. So I must have not been born then when she lived with the rest of the family. My father, I did go see my grandfather who lived in Mexico, San Rafael-Nuevo León. I went to see him in 1959, and he was already an old man. He was probably eighty or something, but I did get to meet him, and we were there for a week, and we got to visit with him a little bit. And an interesting—he has a very interesting background he had. the story is that he outlived seven wives, and nobody really knows how many children he had or anything, but all we know is our father was one of them, and he—there were several people that

he was very close to. Two sisters and three brothers, so they were that many that he—at least he was aware of.

DS:

And so what did your grandfather do for an occupation?

NL:

My grandfather, on my father's side, his name was Juan Francisco, and he was—he worked—they worked in the fields and everything, but he was a skilled blacksmith. So he was [sic] repair wheels on wagons, and shoe horses, and that sort of thing.

DS:

And did you talk with your father about when he came to the States?

NL:

Yeah, he came—I think he was—he was about eighteen years old, I guess—maybe even seventeen—when he came, so that'd have been about 1917, 1918, along those lines there.

DS:

Did he say why he came to the US?

NL:

Not really. I think at that time many of the young man would leave—there were just, like, too many people in the family and probably not enough food to go around, so they were exploring coming to the United States, and maybe finding a better life over here. Of course, which he did.

DS:

What was his first landing spot in the States?

NL:

I think it was in San Antonio, because there was—in my understanding—there was an uncle that lived there. So he stayed there for a year and then when back, and then he came back again.

DS:

Um-hm. And did either of your parents discuss how they met?

NL:

You know what? I don't remember that at all, to be honest with you. But I know there was this big ranch—it was the Kenedy Ranch, and Kenedy Ranch is, like, a splinter of the King Ranch in Texas, but it was a place where a lot of Mexicanos used to come, and they'd always find work

there. It was all kinds of work. Either working in the fields or working ranching, and that sort of thing. And there were several families that were located there, and I think that the families lived on the same ranch.

DS:

And you mentioned you were one of thirteen children. What did your father do as an occupation?

NL:

He was a farm laborer. My father didn't have more than one year's education in Mexico. He never went to school here at all or had any kind of—but he could read and write, and he was pretty good at math, so that's how we—he got to be a crew boss and work in the fields—the cotton fields in west Texas.

DS:

What parts of west Texas would they go through?

NL:

Mostly around the Lubbock area. Anywhere around the Lubbock County area.

DS:

Okay. So did you also travel with the family when they'd come migrating?

NL:

Yes. We all came and we used to go to the Midwest for the crops. They used to refer to as *El Norte* [The North]. And we grew up—and we'd always go to Wisconsin and there some of the crops were cherries, sugar beet, apples, cucumbers, and so those are the type of crops that we had in there.

DS:

What were some of your earliest memories of that time?

NL:

It was fun. I liked being in Wisconsin. I think it was—it seemed like the people there treated you a lot better. There seem to be a lot of racism around—in Texas at the time, and over there they seemed to be more acceptable. I know the farmers there, whenever the crops was over, they would give a big party for everybody that was there. They'd always provide housing for us, and I remember at times some of the church people would come and show us movies and that sort of thing. They seemed, like, to be genuinely interested in our welfare at those times.

DS:

At what age were you when you noticed the difference between people that really cared about you and people that they really didn't?

NL:

Oh, it was pretty early on, when I started school. It was in—I was six years old, and that was in Thrall, Texas, in that area in there. There seemed to be areas where they'd segregate us pretty much. The Hispanics were in one area, but we still were in the same school with others. And I remember them making fun of me because I couldn't speak English, and then also, I would take tortillas to eat our lunch with, and so then I had my mother cut our tortillas to look like bread. You know, cut square, and they kind of passed for a little while. [Laughter]

DS:

I've never heard of that.

NL:

Yeah. [laughter]

DS:

I've heard about, you know, people being, you know, having to eat their burritos in secrecy, but never have them cut square.

NL:

Yeah, it was—that was my idea. It's [sic] worked out pretty good for a while [laughter].

DS:

So what was it like going into school in a community like that? Starting school there?

NL:

Well, when everybody else is in the same boat as you are, it's just not so bad, you know? Because a lot of the people where we lived around were also Mexicanos so we sort of got—you know, we had a large family, so a lot of us were in school at the same time. Half the times we sort of walked home together at the time, but I don't remember doing too much learning, though, as—in my earlier years. It wasn't until, like, I came to Lubbock, I think, that I really started getting an education.

DS:

And what year was that?

NL:

Oh, shoot. I believe we came from Wisconsin to pick cotton here in Lubbock, and it was maybe in early fifties. Maybe '53, something like that. '54. And then we—my brother—my older brother, who was my dad's trunk driver, decided he wanted to take a year off and go on up north. And he got a job with a farmer down here, so my dad said, "Well, let's just stay here this year," and so he got a job with another farmer and provided some housing for us. So we just stayed here, and were seasonal farm workers for years. Just chopping cotton, and my dad did planting, and that sort of thing, and—but then we just never went back into Wisconsin anymore.

DS:

So what did that do to the household dynamics? Finally settling down and having a place?

NL:

Well, it was interesting. The place where we were at, there were little side by side barracks, and there were concrete blocks. It was pretty cold there. We still had our outside toilet, maybe a hundred yards away from the house, and the water, maybe, you know, another fifty yards away, so it was still pretty cold in the winter. I remember seeing the cracks in the walls of the house outside. So we stayed there, I think, a couple of years in these little barracks, and eventually—there was another little house on the farm there—and they allowed us to move into that house. It was a little more comfortable. Still, though, I think there were nine of us. At that time, a couple of—one of my sisters and one of my brothers had been—had married, and so we were all in this little two-room house. My older brothers slept in one room. My sisters and my younger brother and I in the other room, and my mother and father slept in the kitchen. So that's how we made it. And still we did not have running water or anything, and so for years we lived like this. But we were just sort of thankful that the farmer provided us with a place to stay and it didn't cost us anything, because we were available to do any kind of work on their farm all the time.

DS:

All right. Where was this farm located?

NL:

It was close to what is—it used to be called Carlisle. I guess it's now part of Lubbock—the city of Lubbock now. But it's just west of—it used to be west of Lubbock. Now it's in west Lubbock, I guess, it is. Between old Methodist Hospital and air base.

DS:

And what school were you going to out there?

NL:

We went to Frenship School, and that was—that's located in Wolfforth. So that was a pretty—the closest school down there.

DS:

And what was that like? What was the school system like?

NL:

Well, I guess it was a pretty nice little—it was a very small school at the time, so there weren't that many people. Mostly you had your people that farmed there, their sons and daughters, and then there were the workers on the farms, which was us. And then in later years—I think it was maybe the—when I was about ninth grade or something—that's when they closed down the school at Reese Air Force Base, and a lot of the folks that were going to school there from the base began attending Frenship High School. So at that time we got more people coming in, and interestingly more African Americans came in, because there was a lot more in the military. In our school, there were—I was there—it was—I think it was about in the ninth grade when they first integrated the Frenship High School. And I still remember the day. Walking down the hallway, they told us that the superintendent was bringing in the first African American, and I'll tell you right now his name was Sil Harris [?] [0:14:21.7]. And he was a young guy, pretty athletic looking, and—but I remember that all the doors were open to the hallways as they brought him in. Everybody was just looking outside, seeing the first African American attend school there, and it was very interesting. I don't believe that anybody wanted him there. Not even the teachers, I don't think. But after a while—he wasn't a trouble maker or anything. He was kind of a friendly guy, and he started playing football and things. He sort of began getting somewhat accepted there.

DS:

Okay. Do you know if he ever had to face any bad times because of his—being the first one?

NL:

You know, I don't. I never talked to him about it. I supposed that he probably did. I have a feeling that he did. For—I know that some of the others that came from Reese later on, there were a couple of them that did face some discrimination there. By some of the kids, mainly.

DS:

Did—you know, you mentioned how the doors were opened. Did anybody have a sense of what was taken place, as far as historically?

NL:

I don't believe so. Like I said, later on, you know, Frenship High School is now a very big school, you know, and the graduating class is a lot larger than forty-one when I graduated from high school. But I remember—sometimes I get on the internet and I check to see what's going on in Lubbock, and check the newspaper, and I checked at Frenship High School, and I saw that there was—that about three or four years ago—it was a little African American girl that was a cheerleader, and I thought to myself, She has no clue as to what went on to break that barrier for her to be there at that time. So, yeah, it's—some changes have been made there for sure.

DS:

You know, and there's also—amongst Hispanics—there's a lot of the generation now that don't realize the struggles the early generations, like yourself, went through.

NL:

It was, and later on when I finished college, I remember working in the area of education. And working at—for, like, Brownfield, and Lamesa, and Amarillo. And part of my job is coordinating activities for [clears throat] parents and some of the Hispanic kids that were going to [clears throat] school there. There was very little effort on the part of the schools to incorporate them into the regular system there. Not encouraged. For example, there were, oh, you'd have some small communities where maybe about 60 percent of all the little kids in elementary school were Hispanic, and you got to junior high, and maybe it was about 45 percent, and then when they got to high school, maybe two or three of them would graduate. So we started seeing this all across the state and thus this particular program came into being. So we started organizing some of the kids out there that wanted to be part—they wanted to have—because at that time we didn't have any Hispanic teachers, counselors, or coaches, or anybody like that, so—the school board—so nobody really thought much of, I think, the Hispanics being at school. If a kid kind of did all right and wasn't causing trouble or anything, well, he was sort of more or less accepted, you know. But if a kid had problems at home or something like that, it wasn't somebody they were going to encourage to keep on going in school. So we—through this organization, I think we made an input that required—we had a couple of walkouts, one in Lamesa and one in Brownfield at the time. And the kids, they just—just, I guess, got fed up with what was going on. In Brownfield, I remember, one of the schoolmates had died—he was in a car accident—and the kids wanted to go to the funeral, and the school system wouldn't allow them. So one kid who was part of our *consejo*—our counsel—had a little jacket, and it was—it had an Aztec eagle on it, which was representation, at that time, of the Chicano movement. And so he just put it on a broom, and he started walking out, and everybody walked out with him. So that was the first confrontation we had, and of course, they all got kicked out of school, and we had to go in there and negotiate with the school about getting them back in. And there was—at that time demanding, you know, like they do, in demands, and part of the demands, I think were to get

some more teachers and more encouragement, more—allowing them to participate in some of the sports and other school activities, and—it was a fun time of the year at that time.

DS:

Okay. And yourself, you know, being someone that was encouraging these acts, what did the community at large think about what y'all were trying to do?

NL:

Oh, they didn't think much of us. [Laughter] At the time, I remember in Lamesa, when we had to walk out over there, there were several—as soon as you came into town, and they didn't recognize your car there was a policeman that always escorted you wherever you were going. So that was—some of those type of—they were just afraid because a lot of things were happening in—especially California, with the walkouts and everything, and they were afraid they were going to get something like this going. Now Brownfield wasn't much of a threat, there weren't that many people, totally, but Lamesa was a little bit larger, and they were afraid they were going to riot and things like that. And of course none of that happened. We just wanted the kids—and they wanted to have better opportunities there, and demanding more teacher representation, and counselors, and that sort of thing.

DS:

Well, we'll come back to that in a second, but let's go back to when you were in school. At what point did you decide you wanted more than just going to junior high and high school?

NL:

I guess it was about around junior high. I was making pretty good grades, and I really wanted to go to high school, because I had some good friends out there, and I remember my—it was at the time nobody had ever finished a high school—nobody had ever gotten past the eighth grade. So—even my older sister that was one grade higher than me. She was real smart and everything, but come to eighth grade, she had to go to the fields. So here was my turn, and I had to go to the fields too, and so my dad started talking about, “Why don't you get you a contract here with one of the farmers?” And at that time they would give you about twenty five dollars a week, and part of the crop at the end of the year, and I just didn't want to do that at all. And my dad's boss had heard that I was making good grades, so he said, “You know, why don't you keep him in there?” So, part of his encouragement, I think, kept me going to school, and I think I was involved with, like, a Spanish club, and things like that, and during junior high I played football, so that was kind of an activity that I liked. So I was sort of interested in school, and—but making the grades for sure, and so I stayed in high school. And then I started looking at, Well, you know what, I'm not doing so bad in high school. Maybe I can go to college. And this is at the time—I think I was a junior at the time I asked my school counselor, “You know, I'm thinking about going to college. You know, give me some advice, or anything?” So he put his arms around me, and he

says, "Well, look at the way you're dressed. Look at where your parents live. They don't have any money to put you through college." He said, "Why don't you just be thinking about being a mechanic or something like that, you know? Because—just don't get your hopes up too high to go into college." And I wanted to go to a college in New Mexico, of all places. There in Albuquerque. And so that was kind of discouraging to me, but interestingly enough though, after I graduated from Texas Tech and my name was in the paper, he was one of the first ones to call. I thought, Why of many—I guess he's coming around or something. And through the whole conversation, you know, he tried to sell me some life insurance, because now he was in a life insurance business. So he thought since I was a Texas Tech graduate, I'd get me some money, and I could buy some life insurance. So he wasn't so much congratulating me as trying to peddle insurance at me.

DS:

You know, it's interesting you say that, because later in life when you were doing these other battles with your students, did you see where they also tried to channel even the best of the best into some other avenue?

NL:

There was that. Mostly, it was—you know, it wasn't like the kids were dropping out. It was almost like they were being pushed out of school. You know, just make it hard enough for them not to like it there and then they would just—on their own—they'd just drop out, and not pursue—some kids are pretty smart, you know? Afterwards, when I was going to school, I got a job with what they call the Neighborhood Youth Corps, working with youth. Disadvantage youth that have dropped out of school. And I'll tell you what—part of my job was to test them and see where they stood. If they ever wanted to go back to school. And some of them were pretty sharp. You know, their IQ was real high. And I'm thinking, Man, a lot of these kids could have just been something else, but they're on the streets because there wasn't an interest in school for them to stay in.

DS:

Well, let's talk about—you know, you're here as a part of Los Tertulianos, which was Texas Tech's first Chicano, you know, Mexican American—you know, those kind of iconic words—group on campus. When did you come on campus and how did you get involved with that group?

NL:

Well, it was a—I think it was—well, I started school in 1964. So shortly after that. I was in the Air Force ROTC for a while, and I didn't know too many people. Just a couple of people there from high school that they were going to college. And then somebody told me, "Niño, [?] [0:24:59.1] if you want to find some Chicanos, just go down to the SUB," and he said, "Sometimes they're there." So I stopped by there one time and I was just sitting by the SUB

looking outside, and then this girl was walking towards me. I thought she was a pretty, real pretty girl, and I thought she was just going to go by, but she stopped and talked to me. And I hadn't realized that she was a Mexicana, you know? So I got acquainted with her, and after a while she introduced me to Los Tertulianos and I went to the—my first meeting there. And I really enjoyed the fact that we could talk to each other about our backgrounds and some of the experiences we had, but in particular, we were all interested in some of the events around—surrounding—discrimination around Mexicanos around the States. We'd be able to talk about some of those things, and how we possibly could make a difference, and that was very interesting to me.

DS:

You know, and that must've been an interesting time, because all this stuff was going outside. Y'all were among the first generation that was coming to college, and mostly, y'all not only got undergraduate degrees but pursued higher education afterwards. What was it like to being involved with a group that was so focused?

NL:

It was interesting because at the time, you know, when we were just talking about things it was just a passion that we had. Sixties was just a time of a lot of passion, I think. A lot of things were happening. That was the time of the Vietnam War and there was a lot of protesting, I think, against—with the Civil Rights Movement, and things like that in the south. So there was a lot of people with a lot of passion about how things ought to be, and I think that was the generation that began talking about some of these changes. But we really didn't really realize what we were doing at the time. That, you know, some of us would eventually become successful as many of Los Tertulianos have, you know. Several attorneys, professors, and lots of PhDs, lots of master's degrees—they came out of that little group. So at that time, we didn't realize what was going on. We just kind of just lived every day and worked at trying to make some changes, and later on, of course, we look back and see some of the changes that were made. After college, you know, some of the—I mean, we took different organizations that we worked through, and Tertulianos, I think, would helped us to being organized, I think, in a way, in perusing some of these interests. Later on, we became the American GI Forum, LULAC, and the Brown Berets, and other folks that are—some of the unions over here were very well—were interested and involved in some of the changes that were made around education and things like it. We worked separately, but then we used to get together and, on occasions, we'd march together. There was an occasion once, I remember, when there was a school—a store—that was a chain store—and I think it was Clark's. I can't remember what it was now—but they had hired a lot of Mexicanos to make—and I think it was just in Plainview—and to build and everything, with the promise that once it got build, they were going to be hired and work there as employees. As—not the workers out there, but actually employees at the store as clerks. So it was, like, right about almost Christmas, and they let go of everybody, and they hired Anglo clerks, and other people. So it was a big protest on this. So we all marched in Plainview, and again, several of the organizations united together to

do this, and that was pretty fun. You saw the FBI and everybody taking license plates and everything. It was kind of an interesting time. Scary time too, because we didn't want to go to jail.

DS:

Well, you know, and I have to ask, you know, when you're at Tech, and you're doing these types of things, what kind of response did you get from the administration over there?

NL:

To be honest with you, I never had too much to do with the administration. You know, we'd go to school, and attended school, and did our grades, but there was not too much involvement, as far as I can remember, from the administration at all. I don't believe I ever saw a counselor. I'm sure there must have been some that were assigned to us, but unless you knew somebody—in my case, I was having some problems with math, and I knew a math instructor because he used to play the piano at our church, and he helped me through some math. So it was kind of individual people would help each other, but I don't remember us ever getting any direction or anything from—they had just allowed us to do what—you know—what we felt we needed to do.

DS:

Well, that's really startling that—because you would get the sense that in Lubbock, even though it's a community campus, you know, that they would have tried to be stricter on y'all's activities.

NL:

Yeah, you would think so, but I don't remember ever having been pressured or anything—you know—not to do anything. I mean, it could have been on some people, but I don't remember too much.

DS:

And, now, the organization's name means *The Social Gatherers*. Can you talk about that aspect, but also the academic aspect?

NL:

Yeah. We had a lot of fun. You know, I think part of our activities surrounded—we liked to go to football games. We were always Texas Tech fans, and we'd go to every game there was. Usually go with the date, and then later on there'd—we'd get together at somebody's house. So that's how we—you know, different houses every weekend that we played here. And so there was kind of a lot fun getting together and socializing one with the other. That's how we got to know each other pretty well. And later on in life, I think, as friends, we helped each other too. I remember Lenin Juarez, one of our leaders, I would say—and he continues to be a leader—he, pretty early in the game, was a little bit more astute than the rest of us, and could see the future a little bit

more. And I know he spent some time in Peru, and then he came back, and when he was in Washington, DC, and he brought a lot of us down there. I know several went down there, and he was going to law school there at George Washington University, and he brought in several people that were involved with our group down there, and they got their law degrees over there. I went over there, and he was working for an organization called Housing Assistance Council. So it was a national housing corporation. And so I saw him at a picnic one time, and he said, "Won't you come on down with us?" And so I just took off, and drove down there, and began working with them. I stayed with the Housing Council for about seven years. Two years in Washington, DC and then I ran the regional office there in Albuquerque, New Mexico. That's how I got to New Mexico.

DS:

So what was it like when you ventured beyond the borders of west Texas, out towards DC?

NL:

It was a little scary. It was a little scary, that's for sure. Because, you know, we were—other than being migrant farm workers traveling a little bit—never really been outside of the state of Texas much, and we used to go to east Texas, because we had a house over there and then come back to Lubbock, but never ventured anywhere else. So it was kind of—but you know, Lenin said, "Come on down, you know, you can stay with me and Vera." So I did that until my family went down there later—you know, I think about four weeks later they went down there—and I had already acquired an apartment. But it was a little scary, and at that time my dad was not feeling real well, and I thought, Well, you know, if he gets sick or something, I'd be too far away, and so I finally made a decision, you know, talking to the family and everything, and they said, "Well, you know, you probably can come down anyway. So as it turned out, you know, I did go out there for a couple of years and my dad did all right, so—

DS:

And you said the family, so you were already married at that time?

NL:

I was married and had one child. We had one child together at the time when we were in Washington. We lived in Alexandria, Virginia, and went into the district every day to work there.

DS:

What was that community like?

NL:

It was interesting. At that time, there was no metro system like there is now and so we lived—not in old Alexandria, but right outside of old Alexandria. It was an apartment complex there, and I

never lived in an apartment before. I always lived in a house, so it was kind of interesting. But there were a lot of people from Texas that lived there, and from New Mexico, so there was kind of like a Hispanic flavor to where we were living, and we used to get together, and a lot of folks from south Texas. So I got to meet a lot of people from south Texas that lived over there and worked in district. So it was pretty much fun. The commute into the district was kind of interesting, though, because there was a lot of traffic [laughs] that I can remember, and they said something like it was, like, ten miles of traffic coming in. So it was equivalent to—they said it was equivalent to smoke a pack of cigarettes—all the fumes that you were inhaling at the time. So it was kind of interesting. And people drove fast over there. I remember Lenin Juarez's wife, Vera, is the one that taught me how to drive in a big city, and she was really good at it [laughter], so she showed me how to maneuver the highway there, and so I got pretty good at it.

DS:

And what was the main thing you had learned about, living on a commute like that?

NL:

Well, I was glad to be away from there afterwards. [Laughter] But now, of course, they have the metro system, so you can just travel anywhere in the subway down there now, so that's just a lot easier.

DS:

So what brought the move from there to New Mexico?

NL:

We were opening a field office in New Mexico, in southwest. And Lenin and I wanted it to be in Lubbock, and we got voted out because they were also interested in working with Native American housing—Hispanic and Native American housing—so Albuquerque won out and had an office there. So Lenin opened the first office over there, because he had been in New Mexico before working for an educational organization. And so when I got there, it was kind of—he had already paved the way in so many ways there, and so it was pretty interesting. In about a year, the guy that was our director—the immediate director—was a Zuni-Paiute Indian, and so he worked with me for a while and then he went on to do something else and I became the director of the regional office there. We actually worked in a five-state area around Colorado, Arizona, California, Texas, just the surrounding area there working in housing. So it was a pretty interesting time.

DS:

What was the most rewarding part of doing your job?

NL:

Well, I liked being out there, and specifically working with migrant farm workers, because that was—there's always been an issue of migrant housing. And so I got to travel, for example, up here into Muleshoe, and in California, Colorado, and started housing project. A really big housing project there in Los Cruces with the migrant farmworkers there. And it was just always a pleasure, because I sort of identified with them, and got along real well with them, so I did real well there. Later on, as I was working for the Housing Assistance Council, because I was very involved in housing throughout the whole state and HAC—or Housing Assistance Council—had a really good reputation there, and a person that was running for the governor there, he had been governor before, and he recognized some of the things that I was doing, and he asked me to come work for him. So I worked for the Governor Bruce King for four years in Santa Fe, and I headed the New Mexico Housing Authority there. So that was a pretty rewarding job in itself, and we worked throughout the whole state, but I didn't have to travel as much, and then by that time I was getting pretty tired of getting on the plane and flying everywhere, so it was kind of nice just working in New Mexico there.

DS:

Can you tell us about, maybe, some of the changes in the standard of living in those migrant homes from when you first started, towards the end of your career there?

NL:

Yeah, some of the—I think the monies that were available at the time, I think, were pretty easy. Like, for example, in just the migrant rental housing there was a program where you could get a 90 percent grant, and 10 percent loan, at 1 percent interest to build. So a lot of the farmers and other—got encouraged into building housing for farmworkers. So that was really a big plus there. But then we did a lot of self-help housing. That's where I did my master's thesis, on the self-help housing in rural America. I worked with groups in Maryland and California and New Mexico. And those were a group of people, six to ten families would get together, and the Department of Agriculture would lend them the mortgage money, and they'd have a long-term mortgage at 1 percent interest. But they had to work on their houses. And it was kind of fun, seeing them finish each other's houses, and then the party that they had after all the houses were finished. They couldn't move in until everybody finish the house. So those were the programs that the Housing Assistance Council provided some of the seed money to take down the land, and the Department of Agriculture lends them money for building the houses and the mortgages, and so it was just a really rewarding time.

DS:

So it's kind of like a predecessor to the Habitat for Humanity idea?

NL:

It is a little bit like that, except that Habitat uses a lot of volunteers outside. In this case, most of the work was done by the families themselves.

DS:

Yeah, that was the major difference there, and of course the whole loan would be—was higher with Habitat. But still, the idea of, you know, that the families be involved to some extent—

NL:

Oh home ownership makes a big difference. Just in our own family, I think we lived in, like I said, these little—what do we call it? *El campito*.

DS:

Um-hm.

NL:

You know, they was just little brick—not brick—concrete brick housing, side by side, and then to another little house that—it had the—if you know, stucco. How they make stucco. You first put the scratch on it, and then a brown coat on it, and then you do your finish work, which has a color coat on it. Well, in our little house, it only had the brown on it [laughs], and it was just one color, and it was not very well insulated living there. So we lived there for a long time, and then an opportunity came to purchase a house. My dad—somebody saw it—my brother saw it in a newspaper, that they were selling a house up here in east Lubbock, and it wasn't very expensive. So we went to the realtor, et cetera, and then when we put the pencil to it, buying the house, and then having to—we already had the land there. We had bought the—my dad and my brother had twelve acres. So building the pad for it, and building a well, and all of these stuff was—putting it all together and having it moved was just a little bit too much for us, so we gave up the idea of that house. And then later on the house was still on the market about four or five weeks later. So we called again, and it had dropped to the price where we could afford to buy it, so—bought the house and moved it from east Lubbock down to Carlisle, and put it on our farm there. And it was just a big difference. We worked on it ourselves and got it finished out and everything, and then moved into it. It was just really a big difference in terms of how you felt about yourself. You know, you could now invite your friends over, and you weren't embarrassed or anything that—where you lived, you know? Because we'd never invited our friends over where we lived before, so—homeownership was just something that, I think, is just really great for people to have.

DS:

Yeah, and you know, here in this country we think about it as the American Dream, and it's because it affords so many other things, that stability.

NL:

Sometimes that's the only investment a family ever has, you know? They keep paying on the house and to build up a little equity or if something were to happen, you know, they'd sell the house and/or refinance and get a little bit of money out and be able to get you out of bind or something. So it was just a really—and in our case, we just paid it cash, so it was paid off from the beginning—

DS:

Wow.

NL:

So that was pretty good.

DS:

So that really was affordable if could pay for it cash?

NL:

Yeah, although it wasn't very much. I think it was twelve hundred dollars. [Laughter]

DS:

And so—did everybody that was working at the time contribute towards that?

NL:

Oh yeah, and the way the Hispanic families operated—it doesn't matter how many people were in the family, you—all the money, or either your mother or your father kept it, you know, all the money we made on the fields and everything, and then they did give us a little bit of an allowance, you know. And my older brothers got a little bit more, because they worked harder, and then we got a couple of bucks, you know, each. And that's just the way it worked. And they kept the rest of the money, obviously, to pay for food and other of our needs.

DS:

And so what was it like when later on life—here you are working on a program where you're helping people obtain that same dream that y'all were able to achieve?

NL:

Well, it was great, because I could identify with how it would feel for them. Especially for the kids, when they did get a home to move into—a nice home and everything. And along with building the house there were a lot of instructions on how to maintain it and everything, because you know, if you never owned a house in your life you really don't, you know, put too much attention to how to maintain the house, but there's a lot of direction on that. And it took a lot of

pride. You see some of the houses now—I go back and look at them and how nice they look—they still look.

DS:

Okay. And we'll talk about the rest of your career. What else did you do after those years of service there in that housing?

NL:

Well, you know, when I started work on my career, it was here in Lubbock, Texas, as a child care worker. So the county had a program—the state had a program—I worked for the county. And I remember as soon as I got out of college, there was an ad in the paper, and I thought I was the only that had seen it, and it said, "Social worker needed for the Child Welfare Department." So when I went to apply at the Texas Employment Commission there, man, there were about forty people applying for the same job. [Laughs] And I said, "Oh no way I'm going to get this job," you know. And some of the same people that I graduated with, so—anyways, it was interesting that I got the job, and I think I got the job because I was bilingual, and they didn't have any—had never had a bilingual social worker. And I worked for the county before, so I was the very first one, and so that's how I got the job. And I worked for Child Welfare for about a year, and then Vocational Rehabilitation recruited me to start a new program up here, and so I worked for Vocational Rehabilitation for a while until 1970—May 11, 1970—when the tornado hit Lubbock, and it took my school. So the department wasn't willing to start another school at that time, so I was kind of in limbo, and so I went to work—that's when I went to work for the Texans for the Educational Advancement of Mexican-Americans.

DS:

You know, and now that you're back, you're also an artist now. How did you segue into that?

NL:

Well, my brother Danny is really the one that's the artist in the family. He always could draw good and everything. I always enjoyed it in school but I didn't—when I was in elementary school—and then I sort of got out of it, and—but I always enjoyed art. And especially, as a social worker, I studied a lot of art therapy; just using art to work with clients. But when I retired I said, "That's one of the things that I want to do." So I took some lessons in art from—one particular person, Ricardo Chavez Mendez, was a very prominent artist there in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He has his own gallery and his pieces go for, like, thousands of dollars. In fact, some of his work is in the White House right now, but he taught me a lot. He was a Mexicano also, and his style, I liked it a lot, and he encouraged me a lot. So I began there, and then I took lessons from other people around the area. So, little by little, I just started getting—I think I started getting a little bit better, and now I do oil paintings and I have them at a couple of galleries there in the Los Lunas area. We have shows every year and—so I sell some paintings.

Mainly, my love is just doing it. The process. It's just so important to me, and I take all different themes. I think I'm pretty good at landscaping. It's just some of the things that I like to do best, but I really enjoy art. And then I do a lot of crafts too. Like I make these Indian walking sticks, and I've been making for fifteen years. So southwestern type of walking sticks, and then little crosses, and things like that. So I do that. I play the guitar and sing and they—during art shows they hire me to play background music when we're doing art shows. And I sing in Spanish and English, so that kind of works out in the New Mexico flavor there. So I just—the type of things you never had time to do before you retired, and you start doing them, and you just enjoy them.

DS:

You know, on those walking sticks, you know, how do you know what's appropriate to do for a walking stick and what's not?

NL:

Everyone is individual, and wherever I go—go hiking or we go into Colorado a lot every summer—I find me a nice stick and I just bring it back with me, and I start working on it. And this is what—the inspiration that you get at the time, you know, you want to put different plants—I put a lot of turquoise stones on mine, and feathers, and leather, and things like that. So just—all of them are different, and I just—last year, this friend of mine from—here from Texas—gave me some deer horns, so now I'm making some walking sticks with deer horns, and they look really good. So I enjoy that a lot.

DS:

And how did you fall into making walking sticks? Tell us about that first one and why? [NL Laughs]

NL:

Well, this friend of mine that I knew is—his mother was actually a worker that worked with me down there, and he had a Dremel set, and I was always carving, and he had a Dremel set, and he said, “You know, you can do it a lot easier with Dremel.” And he was showing me how to Dremel. I said, “Well, this is a piece of cake,” you know, and so, I got me one of those and started working on sticks. And you can do all kinds of imprints on them, whatever you want to do, drawings and everything, with the Dremel. So I picked up on that, and I saved a lot of time—I've got about three Dremels and a box full of beads, and turquoise, and all kinds of stuff that I put on them.

DS:

So, you know, now that you're in—well, not going to say latter stages of life—but that you're retired and just doing things you enjoyed doing, what do you think about your—the road your life has taken?

NL:

Well, you know, I think where I am is where I'm supposed to be, and the experiences that I've have, I think, have led me to where I am. I've also been an adjunct professor at the UNM University—University of New Mexico—for the last thirteen years. And as an adjunct I just take two or three classes, and I'm not part of what goes on with the school too much, but just teach my classes. And I teach sociology and human services. So I get the opportunity to use all of these experiences to tell these new kids—and a lot of them are Hispanic—about how it used to be, and I try to get them to appreciate, I think, to what the others that laid that path for them did. You know, because they have no clue whatsoever about civil rights and about sacrificing things, or even about—sometimes just even about hard work, you know? But they get to appreciate it a little bit better, I think, coming from us, and you really don't know how much you know until you—I mean, you talk to these kids, you know, they've never heard of Lyndon Johnson, and Great Society they were—John Kennedy being shot, and all these things. I was in Washington, DC when Richard Nixon was forced to resign. You know, that's of part of history that, you know, you just had to have been there to see what was happening at the time, and these kids had no clue as to all of these things that happened. So in a way, you're bringing history back to them by sharing with them some of the things that you know. Like I said, I didn't realize how much I knew until I started talking to them about it and how much they didn't know, so I said, "Well, whatever I have it's a lot more than they've got right now." So that has helped, I think, a lot.

DS:

So you think it makes more an impact coming from someone that actually lived on the front lines and had that experience, than rather somebody that just read about it and supporting the knowledge?

NL:

I really—I really do believe that. There was a young woman who has a PhD there in—at UNM. She was telling me the other day—and she's a very young woman—that she's going to be teaching Chicano studies, and I thought that was very interesting because I'm sure that she just read about it. I'm not sure that she's never experienced—because as young as she has—she wouldn't have too much of an experience in it. But I told her, "You know, I'd like to be in your class," you know. So I'm going to take her class just to be there and help out with it.

DS:

What was it about those days about the Chicano power movements and all of that that you remember the most?

NL:

Well, it's just a scary time because we weren't supposed to be doing those type of things, you know. And then at the same time, it was kind of exciting. It was exciting. I mean, you see

somebody like—I mean, whatever you think, political parties, but it's seeing a lot of the Raza Unida Party be born in Crystal City, Texas, you know, at the time. And we're always thinking, We have all of these Hispanics, and if we ever voted together, we could make some changes. And that's exactly what they did over there, you know? They just saw how many people were in that community, how many people had any positions of power, which was zero, and they just started a new party and started going. So those type of things that—Ramsey Muñiz running for government at that time, you know, and those types of things. Bidal Aguero here in Lubbock, you know, being very involved in teaching us—and he was younger than a lot of us—but really teaching us, you know, to not be afraid and tackle some of these beliefs that people have that we would always be less than and not par with the Anglo community.

DS:

So, what was it like—you know, a lot of people view us Mexicanos as being passive. What was it—and, you know, plus you also had family members that, you know, they lived by working for somebody else. What was it like getting involved and all those issues of what you were putting at stake?

NL:

Again, it was scary. At least it was for me. I don't know for other people, it might not have been, but I was always afraid of going to jail [laughter] because I was—I always just thought it would just hurt my parents to see me be in jail, you know. So I was always—you know, and your heart would be trembling and everything, but you'd still do it. You know, you knew it had to be done, so some of the decisions that you make, you know, were was scary—were scary at times. But you just did them, you know, and you had friends or—so, in other words, you had support all along with you. Like when you were marching; if you were marching by yourself, you would never do it, but you had other friends alongside you, and you know, that made a big difference.

DS:

How about your parents? What did they think of your activism?

NL:

Well, they were—you know, they were, I think, more or less conservative, but my dad, I think he was kind of proud in a way. I don't think he—my dad was never the kind to say too much about what was going on, but I think he was because he'd used to see us. We'd get on TV and start promoting people to go to vote, and tell them how important it was and everything. He used to have a panel—Ernesto Barton would have a panel of people getting up there from the GI Forum, LULAC, and everything, encouraging people, and I think he used to see it on TV and—or thought it was a good thing, you know, to get us involved in voting, and that sort of thing.

DS:

And, you know, your brother Daniel is sitting in here with us, and so maybe I could ask him to address the question of—you know, was he involved also? Was other siblings involved?

NL:

You can ask him, but Danny—shortly after we came into the Texas Tech, he was—you know, I think he just had one year when—here and then he was drafted into Vietnam War, so he took off for a time, so he was gone after that for a while, so—he was in Iran—he came back in the seventies, I think, back to—came back to Tech, and got his degree here afterwards.

DS:

And how about the other siblings? You mentioned you were the first one to go past the eighth grade, so what happened after you?

NL:

Well, Danny and my sister Connie were the other two that were younger than I and both of us—all of us—graduated from college. And she was—she's been a nurse there at—oh it used to be Methodist Hospital. I think they changed the name there—but she's been a nurse there for thirty years. A cardiac nurse—an RN there—and so she's been doing a lot of good in that area also. And also very supportive of our nephews and nieces—and there's a lot of them—in their endeavors to get an education and things like that. So she's been very, very supportive of everybody.

DS:

Okay. So, how about the next generation of all your siblings—have all the kids mostly, for the most part gone to college or?

NL:

Some of them had gone to Texas Tech and other schools. Danny's daughter finished school, and my daughter and my son went to school, but they went to different colleges. They didn't go to Texas Tech, but my son graduated from UNM and from the Colorado Institute of Art. And my daughter graduated—she went to Tech for a little bit, and then she graduated from the University of Houston, and she's a teacher over there in the Texas City now.

DS:

So what's it like knowing the difference that's gone on within the family, just in two generations?

NL:

It happens. Interesting thing—as a social worker, you’re always working with families that just have a lot of problems getting their kids just to stay in school. And I remember when my son was a senior, well, we were having a debate there in terms of what college he would go to, and I got to thinking to myself, You know, most parents are talking about what—you know, to stay in school, and here we’re talking about the type of college. So then at that time, I said, “You know what? You can go to any college you want. I’ll help you out.” So I just—it dawned on me that that’s the conversation we were having. They were used to—that I had finished college, so there was no question in his mind that he was going to college. And the same way as, you know, as—his mother also got a college degree, so my daughter also got a college degree, and there’s no doubt in her mind that she was going to college. So that was kind of a good way of thinking about it.

DS:

So the discussion of which college was a good problem? [Laughter]

NL:

Yeah, so, “Wherever you want to go.” And he went to Colorado Institute of Art and then I wanted him to go Texas Tech or UNM, and he went to Colorado Institute of Art, and then he came back to Albuquerque and went to UNM there.

DS:

Okay. Well, you know, it’s probably right about the hour, and—do you have anything else that you would like to add?

NL:

Well, I think in terms of—I guess, future generations, you know—I would say like I tell my sociology students, you know, take time to reflect on what’s going on in your life, you know. Sometimes, we take this trip and we get there, and then we don’t realize how we even got there. It’s almost like hours or even minutes turn into seconds, and we didn’t realize the view. We didn’t enjoy the journey as much as we should have, you know, and just saying reflect on everything that’s going on in your life right now, and take time to smell the roses, you know? Because they’re going to be real important for you later on in life, you know. And I only learned this after I started putting all this information down, I think, in terms of writing a book, and I started bringing out my journals and the places where I’d written down notes and everything. And I said, “You know, I should pay more attention to this or that, but you know what”—so putting it all together, I would say, you know, the only regret I would ever have—doing it over again—is to maybe reflect a little bit more as every day of life. So I tell my kids—and there’s been a lot of them in thirteen years that have gone through my classes, you know—just reflect on what’s going on right now in history. You know, and I make them—one of the midterm exam

and final exams is, “Who won the World Series?” You know? Just be interested in what’s going on around your world at the time, you know. I guess that’s what I would have to say.

DS:

Okay, and so what’s it like now reflecting and commiserating with your friends from college that are all here in Lubbock on this weekend?

NL:

Oh it was just a blast. That was kind of—I was telling my brother Danny, and I was really a little nervous about it because I said, “I haven’t seen these people—some of them—in forty years, you know?” And I’m just trying to say, “My hair is gray and I lost part of my hair, and all of this.” He says, “Ah, it’ll be all right. It’ll be all right.” So I show up, you know, at the party last night, and doggone it, some of them had no hair and some of them [laughter] with little hair, and some other put a little weight on, and I said, “Oh, I feel right at home here.” [Laughter] So we all looked alike so it wasn’t so bad, you know. But it’s a lot of fun reminiscing on some of the stuff that we used to do, which is probably—you know, it seemed like it’s a wild thing that we did, but you know what? Compared to what kids do today, man, we were meek. [Laughter]

DS:

Okay, well, you know, I thank you for sitting down. I know this weekend is about catching up with family and friends, and I thank you for sharing this hour with us and talking about your life.

NL:

Oh, you’re very welcome.

DS:

Thank you so much.

[End of Recording]