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Interview no. 1478

Robert Wingo

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Name of Interviewee: Robert Wingo
Date of Interview: 13 May 2010
Name of Interviewer: Edmundo Valencia

This is an interview with Robert Wingo on May 13, 2010 in El Paso, Texas. The Interviewer is Edmundo Valencia. This interview is part of the Paso del Norte Entrepreneurs Oral History Project.

EV: When and where were you born?

RW: I was born in Columbus, Ohio, back in 1946, if you want an exact date.

EV: And where did you grow up?

RW: I grew up, my early years, in Columbus, but I really consider myself—although my roots are in Ohio, I'm an El Pasoan. My formative years have all been spent here from middle school through high school, into the Army and then back and into college. So El Paso is home and is where I raised my children, my wife and I. And this is home for us. We're part of the Southwest, permanently.

EV: Who are your parents?

RW: Okay, that's a great story. Elizabeth Louise Wingo is my birth mom and Robert Charles Wingo, my dad. And I lost my mom early in life. And my grandmother raised us from age like four to ten because my dad was a career military guy. And then he remarried, to Rose. And we started moving around with him as a family. We went from Ohio to South Dakota to Georgia, Okinawa and then El Paso. And then I basically had been—I'd stayed in El Paso straight through high school. And then my family moved to Florida after my junior year in high school. And I went down there and I did not like it. So I came back to El Paso and got a job and finished my senior year in high school here, stayed with some relatives and paid rent and work and finished school. And then shortly thereafter, went in the Army.

EV: And going back. When you were here, in El Paso, tell me about your early education. Where did you go?

RW: Well, my first school in El Paso was Hacienda grade school on the east side. And then we moved on to Fort Bliss. And during that little tenure, a little bit later, I ended up doing my freshman year at Burgess, part of it. Then we moved back to the Valley and finished high school, sophomore through senior year, at Bel Air High School.

EV: And what was the language spoken at home?

RW: English, yeah.

EV: And did your family operate a business?

RW: No, my dad, like I said, my dad was in the Army. He was a career military guy in missile defense systems and Hawk Missiles and we had no small businesses, whatsoever, in the family. I guess, in retrospect, it's probably—I guess I'm one of the first in my family that went that route. But my route took me from college, when I finished college, when I came back from Vietnam to going to work for a company that's no longer here, called Billy the Kid. It was an apparel manufacturing company. So right out of school, that's where I went to work. And I worked at Billy the Kid for close to a dozen years. And I met David Sanders, who owned Sanders Advertising. And Dave and I worked together for probably eight to ten of that twelve years that I was in the apparel business. And one day, over lunch, he said, "Do you ever think about crossing over to the other side." And I said, at that point, I was probably thirty-six or thirty-seven years old and young, brash. You think you've kind of figured things out. I was a VP of marketing and sales. I had a company car, stock options, bonus plans. I said, "Why would I do that Dave." David said, "Well, just think about it." So we probably engaged in this conversation, probably back and forth over the course of

about a year. And during that period of time, the company was sold and they were moving the people that they wanted to New York. So I went and looked, along with my wife. And we opted not to make that move and decided to stay in El Paso. So I then pursued two opportunities. One was another apparel company and a second with an agency, in earnest at that point, because I had to make up my mind what the heck I was going to do, before I told them I wasn't moving to New York, so I got it worked out and David and I started working together probably right around January of '84. We put everything together the end of 1983.

EV: And going back, you mentioned that you, your grandma raised you for about six years.

RW: Um-hm.

EV: What's her name?

RW: Helen Marie Jones, terrific lady.

EV: And as a child, what features did you have that maybe you will think that encouraged you later on to be an entrepreneur?

RW: You know what; I don't really know when the entrepreneurial gene really hit. I guess, I was an inquisitive kid. We came from a nurturing family. Our grandmother took very good care of us. Obviously, my dad was the major provider, so he was in Korea and other places. So she was the person that really took great care of us. I don't think the entrepreneurial thing probably hit me as an individual, probably until well after college. My initial thoughts were, Hey, after Vietnam, can you even go to school and be successful and get through four years of college and graduate, since I hadn't even planned on going to college beforehand. So the funny thing is, you sit there and you start working through

things and as time goes on, you start a business career. I started at Billy the Kid in customer service. And even then, I was kind of—I don't know if I'd call it outspoken, but I kind of let people know what I thought. So Armando Chapa, who is a dear friend of mine, was in charge of personnel at Billy the Kid. And so I went in and had an interview with Armando. And every time I see him, we still laugh about it. I was there like an hour and thirty minutes and Armando did all the talking. I'm thinking I have no chance of getting this job. He doesn't know much about me at all. So at the end of the interview, he told me, you know, I went in to interview for a sales job and he says, "Well, you don't have the experience to be in sales. When we call you back, we'll talk a little bit more." So they called me back about a week later and he says, "We have a job for you, to offer you, in customer service." And I went, "Customer service?" I said, "I didn't go to college to be in customer service." I said, "You know what", I said, "if you guys are willing to give me the job, I'm going to take it. I'm just telling you right now I'm not making a career out of customer service", which is probably a dumb thing to tell someone that's giving you a job. But he chuckled and I took the job in customer service, which was probably the best thing that happened to me because it really gave me a chance to learn the apparel business from the ground up because from the time they buy the fabric to all the different pieces that go on a garment, the thread, the zippers, everything, you have to track all that for clients on their orders to see at what stage the products were in before they're going to ship. So I learned a lot about manufacturing. I learned a great deal about merchandising and designing because you had to be engaged in all those things. So I probably spent just shy of two years in customer service. And then there was a fellow, by the name of Bernie Rudner who was the VP and National Sales Manager for Billy the Kid. And he ran the sales and advertising. So I got promoted to be Bernie's assistant. And it was probably one of the greater thrills of my career getting an opportunity to move over to do something that was really kind of in my genes that I really wanted to do. So I studied night and day. And in a matter of months, I knew more about it than he did because he had many other responsibilities. And I just focused on that and in assisting him on sales

duties. So as the company grew, they were looking at splitting it up and having someone that was just going to do advertising. And then Bernie was going to have an assistant. Well I wanted the Ad job. Bernie wanted me to stay where I was at because I was doing a pretty good job for him and I told him, "You know, I need an opportunity, here." So I went to the president of the company who is Dick Arnold. I said, "Dick," because, I mean, we were all on a pretty personal basis at that level in the company, I said, "I would like to have the advertising job. I wrote the job description. I've done all these things." And I said, "I want the job. And if six months after you give me the job, if you give me that chance, and I'm not doing a good job, then just get rid of me." And Dick kind of chuckled. He says, "If you want it that bad, we're going to make sure that you get your chance to try it." And I went from the Ad Manager to VP of Advertising. We had Billy the Kid, then. We had Bill Blass jeans for men and women. We had a girl's line called Calamity Jane. I guess, the saddest thing, when you look at El Paso, was this used to be the garment capital of the world. We made more jeans here than anywhere in the world. And that's all gone. And it's all gone because of cost. And that's why a lot of the product became outsourced to Mexico and the Caribbean, India, Asia. So that's kind of what happened to our industry. Retailers wanted more and more, what we call, cut, make and trim features on the garments, finishing treatments. And people in the United States, the labor costs were much higher. So business kind of eventually faded away into the sunset. And all of the major retailers in America had buying offices in Asia and other places. So they're competing with the manufacturers, in a manner of speaking.

EV: And I'm sorry. I didn't ask you what degree you got from college.

RW: My degree is a BBA in Marketing.

EV: And that was here?

RW: University of Texas, El Paso, and I'm proud to say I'm a Gold Nugget recipient. I graduated in 1973, if memory serves me. I was a December graduate.

EV: And how was your experience at UTEP?

RW: Fantastic. I mean, I was scared to death when I went. It's nothing like it is now. It's kind of funny when you look back. When you went to register for classes, everything was posted on walls in the hallways. You had to go down and fill things out manually. You couldn't—there was no automated anything. And as a freshman, you got what was ever left over. That's what you did for the first couple of semesters before things got to the point where you were far enough along in school where you had first dibs on things. I remember I took whatever I could get. I mean you got some basics and you got a couple of things that you wanted. You didn't always get the classes when you wanted them because they were gone. But my—looking back at UTEP, I've got nothing but fond memories of the College of Business. And a lot of the professors that were there, they were terrific. They really gave me, as a little bit older student, who had come back from the Vietnam conflict, it gave me a chance to kind of put things in perspective and it gave me a chance to really decide what I wanted to do. I was pretty focused on school. And my sophomore year, I got married and now I have two daughters who are grown. One is a partner in the agency. And the other is a gynecological oncologist. My wife has a master's degree from UTEP. My oldest daughter graduated from UTEP. The only one that didn't go to UTEP was the youngest, who is the doctor. She went to A&M and then UT Southwestern Medical School. My wife has her master's at UTEP, has already written a book, called *Learning Doesn't Have to be Complicated*, to help parents teach their children how to have great study habits. So it's been kind of an interesting ride.

EV: What is your wife's name?

RW: Paulette.

EV: How old were you when you when back to UTEP or when you went to UTEP?

RW: I was twenty—I think I started when I was twenty-one.

EV: And how many years were you in Vietnam?

RW: I wasn't even there a year. I was there a little less than a year. That's all the time I had left in the Army. I got my reenlistment talk in the jungle, in a bunker and I told them, "Thank you, but no thanks. If I live the next sixty days, I'm going home. I'm not asking for additional time in Vietnam."

EV: And how was that experience?

RW: Vietnam? Vietnam was—first of all, I think anyone that's going to put themselves in harm's way, it's—it was a tremendous learning experience, but it was also filled with a lot of fear and anxiety, especially on the front end. And when you're being shot at, and I also have a Purple Heart, I mean you sit back and you think about living each day to its fullest and what you would do if you're lucky enough to get to go home. And you sit there and you're living like a pig for nine months. I don't go camping today, because I camped for nine months and I don't have any desire to go camping. But Vietnam taught me survival instincts. You lose friends and you never forget about that. The one thing I'm very happy about is how Veteran's are being treated now, coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan because we weren't treated that way when we came back. We were treated very poorly. It was a very unwelcome war, as far as many Americans were concerned and a very unpopular war. So unfortunately, many of the Veterans also go the brunt of the fact that it was an unpopular war and not many guys talk much about it for many, many, many years because of that reason. We just felt it was better to just let people not know that we were even involved in that because it was not something that America was real happy with. And most of us over there, myself included, were drafted. So it wasn't like we volunteered to

go. We were asked to go. And as duty, honor, country, there we were, fighting. I know a lot of guys that went to Canada as conscientious objectors. I don't hold that against them. I think they had to make the decision that was best for them at that particular point in time. And their decision was I'm not going to be a part of it. I've talked to people. I mean, I have no animosity or anger towards the guys that chose not to go. I think each one of us have to make a decision for ourselves.

EV: When you came back and decided to go to college, were there any flexibility? Was there any flexibility as today, there's financial aid for veterans? What were the conditions?

RW: When I went to school, the first thing I did was, when I got back to El Paso, I got a job. And I ended up working, when college came into the picture, with a company called BDM Corporation. And basically, these guys were scientific engineers and they did scientific engineering and analysis. They did a lot of government contract work. And I got hired as an engineering aid because I had a good friend that worked there that was also a student at UTEP. And I worked for them, pretty much throughout my college education. So I had the GI Bill, which I used to its fullest extent. The company had a fantastic program in those days for any classes that you did well in, they'd pay tuition, books and fees at the end of the semester. So basically what I was doing at that point, I was taking the money that I got at the end of each semester and that's what I used to register with for the following semester. Plus, I had the GI Bill and a job that paid a modest wage. At that time, I was married, or shortly thereafter I was married and we had a daughter. And so my wife worked for the phone company. So it was really important to have those income streams. As a matter of fact, BDM was such a fertile training ground. I learned a tremendous amount about business and life and how you approach things because of the time that I got to spend there. And that was really my first kind of on the edges touches with advertising because what these guys did. I mean, we did graphics and we handled printing functions. I even knew how to run a little 1215 multi lift offset press. It was a great learning

experience. Like I said, I spent four years there. They offered me a job when I graduated, but I was going to have to move to McLean, Virginia. So when you've got the GI Bill and a wage coming in, actually what they were going to offer, it was going to be a little bit of a setback because my wife didn't have a job. So we were going to be making a lot less than we were and moving to a place that was a lot more expensive. So again, I opted not to make that move and I stayed in El Paso. I went interviewing and that's how I ended up at Billy the Kid. Bill Green, who is a very, very dear friend, long since retired from the banking business and other businesses gave me my first interview as I was about to graduate from college. And he's the gentleman that sent me to Hortex/Billy the Kid. I still see Bill. He's a brilliant guy and I can't think of the countless, hundreds, maybe thousands of young people that he helped. And he helped launch my career.

EV: And when you go to the next company, Sanders, David Sanders, around that time, what were the economic conditions in the region?

RW: Well, I think the economy in those days, it was pretty decent. Our company was very much El Paso and regional focused. That's where the business modeling was. David did business in Mexico. He spoke fluent Spanish and with the banks and some of the larger companies in Chihuahua. I mean, the Popular department store was a big client of ours. I don't even know if you're old enough to remember the Popular.

EV: Yeah.

RW: But the Popular was a huge—it was the cornerstone client of the agency. There were Charlotte's and there were other clients back in those days, but those were the big, big, big, big clients. And then, when I came on board, the first big client I landed was Farah, Farah slacks.

EV: And before that, before you came in the company, do you know how long had it been going for, how many years in existence?

RW: Sanders?

EV: Um-hm.

RW: Sanders started in 1958, so now the company had been around over fifty years. I've been here a little over half of that.

EV: And did you find any major obstacles when you came into the company?

RW: Yeah, a lot of hard work. The only obstacles we saw were we were a small shop. There were many other agencies in the market, advertising agencies that were larger and more connected than we were. The key thing I saw was how do we get engaged and involved with civic things so that we had the connections with decision makers, but also giving back to our community at the same time. So the first thing I started doing was volunteering for things and then focused also on the apparel business, not only in El Paso, but also on the West Coast and New York because I had relationships in that industry. So that was kind of where I started. We did car dealerships and on and on and on, but that's really how things kind of began to take shape.

EV: Were there any other factors, besides the ones you mentioned, that helped it grow?

RW: Well, the most important factor in any business is finding, recruiting, hiring and retaining great people. This is a people business. You've got to have a knowledge based and a relationship based business so that people can help engage in making you successful as a firm because you cannot do it all by yourself. Anybody that has a small company, and they're trying to do everything, their

success is going to be limited. You have to give responsibility to other people. And by doing so, it helps you grow because you have centers of excellence in many different places. And that's really one of the things that we really empowered leadership in this company to do. And when I joined the company, there were probably fourteen or fifteen of us at that point. We were a pretty small firm.

EV: And what role has your family played in the growth of your business?

RW: My family? Well my daughter's played a large role, since she's really heading up the Austin operation now. But other than that, my wife has not been involved in the agency business. She's been a major supporter, but not a direct supporter in going out and being engaged in marketing because she's an educator.

EV: Have you faced any challenges growing a business as an African American?

RW: I think anybody that's an entrepreneur and in business—business comes in cycles. As far as El Paso is concerned, I don't feel I faced any kind of challenges based on racial boundaries. I think that entrepreneurship, unto itself, is a challenge. In business, you have ups and downs, just like the stock market. Or you see businesses that start and fail. And fortunately for us, we've had over a fifty year track record of doing business. Dave Sanders picked me to carry on the legacy. And as long as I'm here, his name will be the first name on the door. When we have economic downturns, advertising is affected. So you batten down the hatches and you try to get through the rough spots and then re-grow your base. Right now, currently, it's probably the most active new business cycle I've seen in ten years. There's lots of people pitching, both locally—or opportunities, both locally and nationally and regionally for business opportunities.

EV: Does your company enjoy any advantages of being a minority owned business?

RW: I don't think so. I think at the end of the day, people do business with people they trust. Trust plus respect equals relationships. If people don't trust you, you're never going to get inside the door. If you don't do a good job, you're not going to be around for very long. You're going to be exiting the business pretty quickly. It's really difficult to put a handle on does it really make a difference. Again, I look at people I compete with every day. I respect them. I hope they respect me. We try to do a good job. We always try to give people the benefit of the doubt. We just go out there every day and look for opportunities.

EV: Would you please tell me more about how you have expanded?

RW: Well, about ten years ago, we thought it would be a great idea to get an office in a bigger market, so that we had a shot at working on brands that were more national than regionally focused. El Paso is a tremendous market and it's home and it's been my home for thirty-five plus years. I love it here. And this is where I'm staying. But from a business point of view, we had to put ourselves in a position if we wanted to have a company that looked different and could attract the talent that we needed, a larger base, so we opened an Austin office. And the Austin office, which we opened almost a decade ago, has proven to be a catalyst in helping us attract national business. Now from that office, a lot of the work has been minority or diversity focused because you can't go after Fortune 500 companies against the big guns that are all over the United States and the world. So that's kind of what we focused on and from that, we've had an offshoot of a secondary company called SWK Partners, which is a marketing and advertising company out of New York city and El Paso. All of our back office operations are here and all of the customer interface and customer solutions are handled out of New York. So now we basically have offices in three cities and then we have some little satellite operations where we have individuals that are engaged. They're not really offices. They're presence. We have a presence. We have people in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Baltimore, Las Vegas, but those are not offices.

EV: Do you belong to any of the Chambers of Commerce in El Paso?

RW: Uh-huh.

EV: Which ones?

RW: I'm engaged with all of them. Dues paying member with the General, the Greater Chamber and I'm on one of their advisory boards and the Hispanic Chamber and we stay actively engaged with whatever the Black Chamber is doing. I just think giving back to El Paso is critically important. I serve on the College of Business Advisory Board with Dean Nachtmann. I'm on the Wells Fargo Advisory Bank Board. I'm on the Las Palmas Del Sol Medical Board. I serve on the TexasOne Board for the state, which is a State Economic Development Board for Texas and I also serve on the Martin Luther King Memorial Board, which is building that National Monument in Washington DC, in honor of Doctor King.

EV: Do you consider or view yourself as a leader or role model?

RW: You know what, role models and leaders, I think that's in the eye of the beholder. What I try to do is I wake up every day and say, How do I do the best job possible for the employees of my company, for me, and for my community? One of my greatest involvements right now is I'm co-chairing the YWCA Capital Campaign with Hector Gutierrez. Critically important for the future vitality of this community, the Y plays such a key role. And again, that's an opportunity to give back. I'm just telling you the things I'm active in. There's been so many things that I've been on that I'm not doing right now—from Higher Ed Coordinating Board in Texas, I sat on that for a couple of years. Finance Commission of Texas, I was on that for four years. The key thing is I want to help young people make a difference. We bring interns in to our business. I don't know if that qualifies as mentors or role models or leaders. I think leadership, again, is something that has

to be defined by the person that's consuming that information. I would like to be remembered as someone that made a difference, that tried, that gave back and that also had some fun in life.

EV: Why do you consider working with, and for, the community essential?

RW: Why do I feel what?

EV: Why do you consider that working with the community, and for the community, is essential for an entrepreneur?

RW: Well, I think it's essential for a number of reasons. When you look at El Paso today, I think El Paso was stuck for many years in a non-visionary mode, in terms of growth and development. I think today, the last three or four years, I've seen more unity, more excitement and more opportunity for growth in El Paso than I have in the last twenty years. When you look at what's happening in the revitalization of downtown, when you look at the new entertainment districts, when you look at the new Mills Building coming in, and you look at the brand new courthouse, and you look at all the companies that are beginning to gravitate back towards downtown, downtown is the core of any major metropolitan area. Everything emanates from downtown, out. I think the involvement of REDCO and the city economic development group, the state economic development board, how we're attracting companies into our marketplace is critically important. I'm glad to say that ADP, one of our largest new additional companies that moved in here a few years ago, I played an active role in helping them select El Paso, because it's a process. And I've never felt better about what's going on. And you look around and you see new restaurants and new entertainment venues and new opportunities that, I think, are the kinds of things that are going to keep younger people engaged in our market, if they can see job opportunity, growth opportunity, fun things they can do when they're not working, those are the things that are going to help young people engage. We're at a point where we've all

talked to a great extent about the brain drain and people leaving. But I'm starting to see people come back that want to be a part of this community. I still think El Paso is one of the best kept secrets. I was listening to the news last night and this morning and I think it's a testament for our market, but it's also something that we have to study. It says that we are way up in the ranks, in terms of job growth and stability. BRAC and Fort Bliss is—I don't think a lot of El Pasoans fully comprehend what that means for our community. I mean, that is a huge part of El Paso's growth, soldiers coming in, their families, the infrastructural changes that you see when you fly into our city, looking down on what I call the new Fort Bliss because it looks like it's doubling in size from the air. I can't tell you exactly how much land mass that's taking, but a combination of so many people work so very hard from the city, from the county, from the private business community, from concerned individuals, our politicians, everyone has worked very hard in their own way to help our city expand and grow. And I think from where I sit, El Paso's future is very bright. We've got a lot of work to do and a long way to go. But I tell you what, progress is being made. Every day you can look and you can see a lot of new and exciting restaurants and businesses and opportunities coming in to marketplace. So I'm thrilled. I'm excited. I'm emotionally connected to what's going on. And hopefully, we'll continue doing our part.

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

RW: (Laughing) You know, I don't know. I don't know if I would have done anything differently. I think being in business is a risk reward system all the way around. I think businesses have life cycles and stages. When I first got into this business on the advertising side, my expectations were how do we build the best business in El Paso, in advertising? And that was a formidable task. Then I wanted to know, how could we build the best business on a national basis? And from a minority point of view, 2009, we were the African American Agency of the year, as noted by Black Enterprise. We were the fifth largest African American owned agency since I'm the majority owner that we get qualified that way. But our work is

much broader than just doing targeted work. We do general market. We do Hispanic. We do it all. The agency is made up of all types of ethnicities and backgrounds and that's one of the things we pride ourselves in is bringing in best in class individuals and executives to be a part of this company that share our mission and our core values. And we want to make sure that we have connective tissue that ties us all together. If we don't have a like mind, in terms of where we're going, then somebody doesn't fit.

EV: What advise would you offer a young—or somebody young that's starting a business today?

RW: Today, I would tell someone to be very, very careful, to make sure you know exactly what you want to do. And do you have the financial resources to follow your dream, for at least a year, to make sure you have a chance to become completely and totally engaged in that process? Surround yourself with the best and the brightest people that you can. That's probably the most solid advice I could give anyone. If you're not doing it on your own, you better have great people or you're going to have a real problem.

EV: What hopes do you have for the future?

RW: Well, for me, my hopes is that the individuals that I brought on board will continue the legacy of this agency and hopefully, if Dave Sanders is looking down on us during this interview, he's saying, "Wingo, you took what I gave you and you turned it into something bigger and more broader and sweeping and now it's your responsibility to make sure that the next generation does the same thing so that we can continue building on something." I hope to be able to look back and go, Wow; these kids did a great job in taking this to multi hundred millions of dollars in business. And my other vision is I hope to see a thriving, vibrant El Paso del Norte region that includes El Paso and Juárez and southern New Mexico and that we, as a region, can attract the kind of business that will create job

opportunities and opportunities for wealth for many, many people in the Southwest, and especially in our immediate geographical area.

EV: Well sir, I don't have any more questions. Is there anything you would like to add?

RW: Well, I hope I've shared with you what you need to know. If there's any follow up questions, just let me know and we'll make sure it happens.

EV: Okay. This was an interview with Robert Wingo on May 13, 2010, in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Edmundo Valencia. This interview is part of the Paso del Norte Entrepreneur's Oral History Project.

[End of Interview]